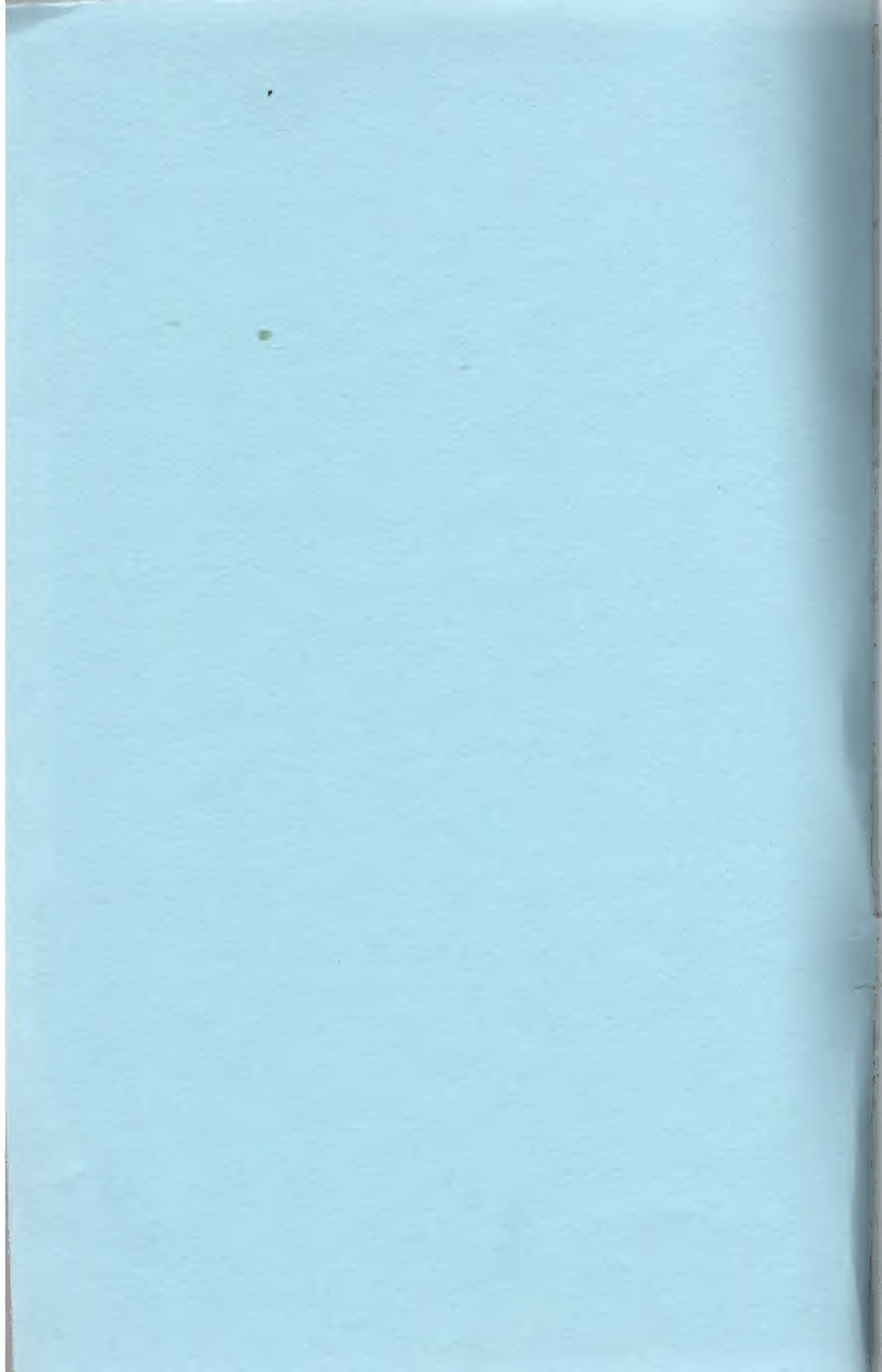


KNIGHTBEAT







KNIGHTBEAT VIII

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**You Did It
(Last Knight)**
by Nancy Parry

Well, you did it.
Tore out our hearts,
oblivious to the fact that we
needed you there,
craved the illusion.

Old friends died.
Killed, one after the other,
like so many
chessmen
falling.
Your (self-indulgent) choice.
And, why not?
In ensured closure for you.
No return visits.
No point.

We loved you.
You threw it back
in our faces
as though it was nothing.
Who were you before?
Before us?
Who will you be now?

Our efforts didn't matter.
Our dedication.
We didn't matter.
Were we fools to give you
Devotion?
Apparently.

The question is,
why didn't you care?
If not for us,
our displayed loyalty that helped make you
what you became,
then for the structure
you so willfully demolished.

How could you
disregard our feelings
while you destroyed
your world?
Our world, by proxy.
You were vampire cold,
and we were left,
your drained victims.

You did it, all right.
Tore out our hearts.

We will not waste our love again.

Unfinished Business: Alliances

by Bettie J. Brown

"I guess one cup of coffee couldn't hurt."

Delilah beamed triumphantly, grabbed his hand, and was leading him into the apartment when she said, "On second thought, I have a very old bottle of Madeira I would like you to try."

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" Natalie questioned. "You can't be mistaken?"

"There's no other reason for Delilah to be in Toronto," Janette was emphatic. "LaCroix must have sent for her, and it has something to do with Lucien."

"But why now? It's been six months since Nick died. Why is he making his move now?"

"I don't know; maybe he feels six months is an adequate period of mourning. Does the timing matter? We both know why he's interested in Lucien."

"Yes, I'm quite aware!" Natalie snapped. Fear for her child's safety was pushing her nerves to the breaking point. She reached out to Janette and gently touched her shoulder by way of apology. "'I'm sorry. I know you're taking a great risk telling me of your suspicions.'" Natalie walked over to the telephone and dialed Lucien's number once again. Only the machine answered. "It's five a.m. Where can he be?"

Janette's expression spoke volumes of centuries of experience with the opposite sex. "He's a grown man, Natalie! Don't worry. Delilah won't harm him. That would interfere with LaCroix's plans."

"You really believe he intends to bring Lucien across?"

"Don't you?"

Natalie reluctantly nodded. "I've always known that, of all my children, Lucien would be the most threatened by the past, but now that we know what LaCroix plans, how can we stop him?"

"I've been thinking about that, and I'd like your opinion." Janette told Natalie her idea.

At first, Natalie was surprised, then hopeful, then amused. "It just might work. Nick was right, you are a loyal friend."

Janette found herself unexpectedly touched by Natalie's heartfelt statement. The two women regarded one another, once again bonded

together by their mutual 'affection' for Nicholas, this time to save his legacy — his son.

The knock on the door was insistent. Whoever was there was not going away. The door was suddenly flung open, startling the visitor. "Uncle Donny," Janine whined in annoyance, "what are you doing here?!"

"Just making a delivery of coffee and doughnuts to my favorite cop." Don Schanke twinkled with charm. "Well, aren't you going to invite an old man in out of the cold?"

"It's summer, Uncle Donny."

"Well, out of the heat, then." Janine backed into the room, allowing Schanke to enter the apartment. He placed the food on the coffee table in the living room, then turned to face his irate goddaughter. Janine stood before him, arms folded and foot tapping. "Did I ever tell you how much you remind me of your mother?"

"Stop stalling, Uncle Donny. Why are you here?"

"You sure you don't want a doughnut and some coffee first?"

"Uncle Donny!"

"Okay! I heard what happened last night, kiddo. How are you doing?" Janine started to answer. Schanke raised a hand to stop her. "And don't give me any bull. Remember, I was a cop for more years than you've been alive. I'll know if you're lying to me."

"Oooohh!!" Janine yelled her frustration. She paced away, putting a slight distance between them before answering. Her hands were clenching and unclenching at her side while she relived the incident. "I walked in on a robbery. My partner had to take the guy out. End of story."

"Yeah, right! What is it with you Knights?! I thought non-answers went out when your father retired from the force. Jan — sweetie — this is your Uncle Donny. You can tell me what's really going on with you."

"I've already talked about this with my mom."

"Who do you think told me?" Janine looked surprised. "Natalie was a cop's wife. She knows you're hurting and you need to talk it out. She also knows you're Nick's daughter and will probably try to keep your feelings bottled up until you explode. Did I ever tell you about the time he lost it and tried to run down a city bus? Never mind. I was your dad's partner. I'm your godfather. You can trust me." As he was speaking, Schanke had been inching toward Janine, who still had her back to him, her shoulders hunched. He put his arms around her and she relaxed in his sheltering embrace.

Schanke spun her around to face him. "I'm here for you, kiddo. We all are. Always remember that."

The last of Janine's reserve cracked. "I was so scared! I thought he was going to kill me!" She threw her arms around him, burying her head in his chest while deep sobs wracked her body.

Schanke stroked her head. "It's okay, princess. Let it all out. Uncle Donny's here."

"Mrs. Anderson!" the nurse called out. Nicole raised her hand. "The doctor will see you now." Nicole grabbed her things and followed the nurse into the inner office.

"You're absolutely sure about this?" Nicole asked some time later, unwittingly aping her mother.

"I thought this was good news. It is, isn't it, Mrs. Anderson?"

"Yes — of course it is. I had my suspicions, but ... This is great news. Great news," she repeated, somehow unconvincingly.

"The nurse will give you prescriptions for prenatal vitamins and supplements. Make an appointment to see me next month."

"I'll be starting my surgical rotation by then ..."

"Make the time. We want you to have an uneventful pregnancy. Doctor, heal thyself. Your patients will benefit."

"All right. See you in one month." Nicole left the doctor's office in a daze. A baby. She and Ross had spoken about starting a family, but now ... the timing couldn't be worse. Something was up. She could feel it. Her family was in danger and it was very near. And now she had a baby to worry about. A chill came over her. "Don't fret, honey. Mama will protect you. Now, let's go home and tell Daddy."

Lucien stretched, enjoying the luxuriant feeling of satin sheets against his skin. Satin sheets? His hand fell against a soft, decidedly female body next to him. It was Delilah, looking magnificently beautiful even in repose. He could think of worse fates than waking up naked in bed with the woman you were hopelessly in love with.

He rested on one elbow and watched her sleep, his eyes drinking in her beauty. "Lucien, old man, you've got it bad," he whispered to himself. Delilah stirred in her sleep, shifting her position so that her nude body was now draped across his. Lucien was in heaven.

Memories of the previous evening came flooding back to him, up to the moment she invited him in. After that, it got a little sketchy. Okay, he

couldn't remember anything after he drank the wine. It had been very potent, and he wasn't much of a drinker. Being with Delilah was something he would like to have savored. Now, to his embarrassment, what he thought was a beautiful moment was lost in an alcoholic haze. Just great.

"Lucien?" Delilah called out his name, then smiled up at him. "I'm glad you're still here."

"I'm sorry ..." Lucien began. "I don't usually do ... this sort of thing on the first date. It must have been the wine."

"Are you saying you didn't enjoy my — company?" Delilah teased.

"No. No! I'm sure it was ..."

"You're sure? Don't you remember?"

"Of course I do!" Lucien protested. "It was wonderful!"

Delilah snuggled closer to him and Lucien found it difficult to think, but something was definitely beginning to stir. "Why don't you spend the day, Lucien?"

"I really should go. I ..."

"You don't want to leave," Delilah said suddenly, her eyes hypnotic, her voice hard and compelling.

"I don't want to leave," Lucien repeated mechanically.

"You're tired. Go back to sleep."

Lucien yawned. "We were up awfully late. I'm still sleepy. I think I'll go back to sleep. Sorry."

"It's all right, Lucien." He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. *Child's play*, Delilah laughed to herself. She pulled the covers back and examined Lucien's sleeping form. *Not bad for a mortal. I can understand LaCroix's interest.* She reached out a hand and brushed an errant curl back into place. An unreadable expression crossed her face.

Schanke asked, "Any more doughnuts?" then reached inside the bag himself, only to come up empty-handed. He shrugged his disappointment. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Uncle Donny."

"No problem. Always glad to help out."

"You did. I haven't heard those stories about you and Dad's days as homicide detectives in years. Did he ever tell you why he jumped on that bus?"

"Never! He was always doing crazy stuff like that during the early days. He settled down after he married your mother."

"You ever hear him mention a Janette or LaCroix?"

"Janette. Now there's a name I haven't heard in years. She was an old flame of your father's ... before he married your mother, of course."

"She can't be. This woman's in her early thirties."

"Maybe she's a relative. Why?"

"There's something about those two ..."

"Now you're starting to sound like a detective."

"Like father, like daughter. Uncle Donny, do you still have friends on the force?"

"What ex-cop doesn't? Once a cop, always a cop."

"I think you and I need to find out more about Dad's old friends. I don't know why, but it's important, and who's going to listen to a rookie?"

"Sure. Why not? When do we start ... partner?"

It was long after sunset when Lucien left for his own apartment. "I'll meet you at the Raven at nine. You sure you don't want me to pick you up?"

"Positive. I'll meet you there." Delilah kissed him fully, deeply, enticingly, then pushed him out the door and closed it. Lucien lingered a few moments before finally taking his leave.

Delilah was grinning to herself when she unexpectedly felt the presence of one of her own kind. She whirled and hissed a warning, eyes blazing. "Who dares have the temerity to enter my home uninvited?!"

Janette drifted from the shadows near the door. "Bon soir, Delilah. Is that any way to greet an old friend?" She tsked her disapproval.

"You should have more respect for your elders, young one! Or should I teach you some manners?" Delilah spat at the older-appearing woman.

"Don't get your fur ruffled, my dear. We need to have a little chat. I have someone here you should meet." Without preamble, Janette opened the door and allowed Natalie to enter.

"Good evening, Ms. Samson. I hear you've become 'friendly' with my son, Lucien. I am Natalie Lambert-Knight." Janette and Delilah exchanged glances. "May we sit down? We have a lot to discuss and, since you're meeting Lucien for drinks, we don't have any time to waste."

"By all means. Come into my parlor, ladies." Delilah was looking forward to hearing what this odd couple had to say.

Redemption

by Shelia Turner

She walked, the full moon setting at her back. Walked through the high grass and night-blooming flowers. She trailed her fingers over their fragrant tops, marveling at the secrets they revealed at her touch. She knew not her name or where she was or even where she came from, but she knew where she was going. She walked under the slowly lightening sky with a purpose. Something was calling her. Needing her as much as she needed them. Visions or memories flowed through her as she walked. Visions of a lonely blond man and a woman with love and hope and faith gleaming in her eyes. She was walking to a promise kept. She paused at the edge of a valley and her heart leapt with joy. Under a gnarled black tree was a man. A fair-haired man on his knees and dressed in robes the color of dried blood. His head was in his hands and he was crying. Crying with despair and loneliness. The agony of one who believes he is lost and forgotten.

Not lost, not forgotten, sighed the night. She went to him, down on her knees beside him, and cradled his head to her chest. She rocked him and murmured words of love and faith into his hair. She lifted his head and kissed away the pink-tinged tears that fell from his green/gold eyes. Silently she urged him to his feet. The sun was rising and he was afraid.

"Love and faith," she whispered against his mouth as she gazed unflinchingly into his eyes. Eyes that betrayed how he was so very different from her. He looked into her eyes and knew what she felt. She saw the beast, she saw the man, and when he looked into her eyes he didn't see terror or disgust. He saw only unconditional love. The sun rose, chasing away the night. She held him close as the rays of the sun burned the blood from his garments, the green/gold from his eyes, and the darkness from his soul. Hand in hand they walked. The light of the morning sun haloing them with gold. They had faith. They had love. They had each other. Forever.

A Fly By Night Story

by Lorraine Duffield

Have you ever thought that you might truly be crazy? I mean, not some momentary aberration, but actual dementia with hallucinations and everything? I know I never would have believed such a thing about myself if it weren't for what I saw last fall. You won't believe this, but I *saw* a man fly, not once but twice!

I was walking home from work through the park. The leaves were just turning their swan song colors. They could just barely be made out, the colors I mean. Because the sun was just about completely down. It was, perhaps, foolish of me, but I was taking my time on my walk home. There was a wonderful autumn briskness to the air. The scents of earth and grass and clean air were intoxicating to me.

As I walked along the path I spied, a short distance away between some trees, a pile of dead foliage; sticks, grass, leaves, you know, just organic odds and ends raked up and left by some gardener. Well, I wouldn't have given it a second thought, but it began to *rustle*. Startled, I watched a figure shoot out of the pile and into the sky at the exact moment the sun slipped over the horizon. It wasn't a bat, or a bird, but a *man*.

I couldn't make out much, only a brief glimpse of dark clothing and shaggy light-colored hair. But he *did* turn his face in my direction and what I saw there has stayed in my memory like a snapshot. He had eyes that glowed with yellow fire and, don't laugh, pointy teeth. I'm not making this up. For real this man flew, had pointy teeth and *golden* eyes. If I wasn't sure they didn't exist, I'd say I saw a vampire.

Amazing, you say, correct? Well, it would be if that was all there was to my story. However, a few other things happened that evening. After my initial shock at what I now know I saw, I decided that my imagination was working overtime and resumed my walk. I didn't even want to *think* about walking over to that pile from where that hellish vision had shot pall mall. That might have proven the whole thing to be real, something my poor confused mind couldn't have tolerated for a second.

Anyway, there I was, trying to recapture my earlier mood of peaceful tranquillity, when I came upon my second shock of that night. Actually, the worst shock, a sight I will never forget, laying across the path, was the body of a young woman. Her limbs were splayed out in funny angles, usually impossible. But she was dead, so I suppose anyone could put her in whatever pose they wanted. *She* wasn't going to object. I'm sorry, that was

completely morbid. It also indicated the sense that the sight left me unaffected. Far from it, I don't recall it, but apparently I began to scream loud and continuously, until people came running from different directions. How so many people could have been about and yet I was the lucky one to find the corpse, I don't know.

She must have been there for a while because her body had a brittle look about it. It seemed to me that if you were to turn her over, her arms and legs would stay in the same position, like a dead 'possum. Anyhow, after I finished screaming, I don't recall much until the detectives showed up. Someone led me to a stone bench, another placed a jacket around my shoulders. Someone, I don't know who, began to rhythmically rub my arms. I didn't look up or anything, but I remember a man's cologne. Clean and masculine, yet not loud. Comforting.

Some time later, the officers arrived to ask me questions. What joy. All I did was happen across some poor unfortunate crime statistic. Still, I was the first on the scene, so I got to have the fun. I also got to answer some stupid questions.

"Did you see anything?"

"No."

"Do you know the victim?"

"No."

"Why were you in the park?"

"To walk home from work."

More questions, increasingly banal and also somewhat insulting, the implication being I had something to do with the crime because of my extreme reaction. Hey, shoot me for being sensitive. I thought it was the people who don't care about seeing dead bodies who cause them to be in that state.

So, there I was, just trying to keep my cool, when the detectives showed up. They introduced themselves. Don Schanke and Nick Knight. I don't know how my poor shattered psyche could handle it, but once again it had received a shock. Because, minus the glowing eyes and long teeth, Detective Knight very closely resembled the manbat from earlier in the evening. He didn't fly, but he had that light, shaggy hair ... *And*, I noticed with some trepidation, a piece of grass sticking out of his hair. I played it as cool as I could, but my heart was racing. He freaked me out so much, my voice began to shake. The older detective, the one called Schanke, looked at his partner as if to say, 'We've got a pigeon here.' The more I tried to convince the detectives I had nothing to do with the murder, the more shrill my

voice became. Soon, I was just about convinced *myself* that I had done the girl in.

I have to say, though, that the blond detective, Knight, was very solicitous. He never did get the skeptical look on his face that his partner now seemed to wear as a permanent expression. He gently led me over to a park bench and then stood off some distance away to argue with his partner.

I was feeling rather put upon and miserable when I noticed yet another sight. Although there were scads of spectators around, only one of them stood out, mainly because he wasn't gawking at the body, but was *observing*, I guess the word would be, with rapt attention, the actions of Detective Knight.

He was handsome, older, with short spiky blond hair. He had an air of supreme self-confidence. There was something about him that just drew me in like a magnet. My heart tripped over and began to flood with rich heavy blood. I could feel it as it coursed through my body in a way I'd never felt before. Somehow it seemed to be a siren song, calling the tall man over to me. With a hint of a smile, he did, ambling across the ground with the grace of a panther, to stand in front of me.

"You called?" he said, but I barely heard. Close up, his effect on my senses was even more devastating. As if in a dream, I pulled the jacket off my shoulders. I had the uncontrollable urge to bare my neck to him. It could have been a trick of my fevered imagination, but it seemed as if his eyes grew just the least bit warmer. The effect was dispelled, however, when Detectives Knight and Schanke made their way back to me.

Schanke didn't look happy, but his partner announced that I could leave. I couldn't have been too certain, but when Knight looked over to my stranger, *his* eyes grew frosty as the North Pole. He looked even more displeased when the stranger offered to accompany me home. The thought never occurred to me to say no; I felt drawn, as if by magic, to this man.

Like he had with Schanke, Knight pulled the man over a certain distance away and had a short, albeit intense, exchange with him. In the end, though, the man won out and I presently found myself on the path leading to my home, with him.

We walked in silence, a thing well appreciated by me, since I loathe and despise small talk. I don't know how to do it, and I feel quite out of my element when forced to engage in it.

Without the distraction of words, I discovered what I might not have otherwise noticed. The cologne, which I had found so comforting previously,

clung to him. I have already stated the attraction I felt. Well, now it seemed intensified. If I didn't know better, I would say he was fueling it. Ridiculous. I know. Remember, however, I thought I had seen a vampire earlier. What's a little mind control compared to that?

Soon enough, we arrived at my house. It was a stark brick thing left to me by my parents when they passed. I invited him inside, offering him a drink. The same smile crossed his lips again and he declined. I decided to indulge, though, and brought out a bottle of red wine. I uncorked it and poured, ignoring things like letting the wine breathe and such. Breathe? These grapes died a long time ago. Fermented, they could at least serve to calm my shredded nerves. The stranger watched with amusement as I downed several glasses in a row.

After a third, he came over and took the bottle from me, setting it with my wine glass, which he also took, on the coffee table.

He trailed a hand from the nape of my neck to my mouth. I was entranced, waiting to see what he would do next. Apparently not one to disappoint, he leaned in to kiss my lips. He molded them softly, savoring the feel of their texture. Reaching down, his hand sought out mine, linking the fingers together. He drew our joined hands up to his chest and leaned further into the kiss. I had to keep my fingers wrapped around his or I would have fallen, my back being arched and his hands bearing my full weight. I felt possessed by this man, the movements of his mouth against mine bore me no quarter.

Soon, I felt overwhelmed; my heart was racing like a horse in the Derby. My nostrils were filled with the scent of him. I wanted to surrender all of myself to him. But, as if he sensed my total capitulation, he stopped and pulled away. Reaching out, he steadied me with a hand and spoke quietly and evenly.

Apparently I was to remember, belatedly, a man running from the scene of the crime, who had black hair, jeans, and a ripped Metallica T-shirt. I was to remember this with embarrassment as a victim of hysterical amnesia.

The stranger continued with his 'suggestions' never suspecting, I suppose, that I wasn't in the least bit hypnotized. I went along with it; I figured, what could it hurt? Perhaps this stranger knew something about the murder he just couldn't tell the cops, for whatever reason. As it would turn out later, these suggestions would prove instrumental in the capture of a killer. Gripped tight in the hand of the victim was the fragment torn from the murderer's T-shirt. I did wonder, as my memory was supposedly being influenced, how anyone could buy my 'eyewitness account' when it had

been obvious to even me that the woman had been dead a considerable length of time.

It all turned out okay in the end. That's all I really have to say about it. A killer was caught, and no one doubted my word.

After he finished feeding me the story he wanted me to tell, the stranger planted one last instruction: stay where I was standing until he was gone. Like a good little puppet, there I stood as he planted one last kiss on my lips and then left, softly closing my front door behind him. I ran to the window and there, for the second time that night, I saw a man fly. He looked down, hovering in midair, as if to say he knew I hadn't been fooled for a second, and smiled.

My breath caught and my heart stopped. What could he do? Did he know about my seeing the other man? What he did was to blow me a kiss and then take off, straight for the moon, it seemed.

Well, like I said, I gave the police my description, they arrested the killer, and I didn't see the stranger again. I obsessed about him for a while. What would I do if he returned? Should I be afraid? But time wore on, and I became convinced that the flying bits were mere imagination. I've always had way too much for my own good.

But then I turned on the radio one night and there he was. Like a caress, his voice carried over the airwaves to my ears. Somehow, I thought, he knew I was listening. I wanted to go to him. I felt him calling, *drawing* me to him. In a daze, I climbed onto my roof and stepped off. After all, I had been kissed by a vampire, didn't that now mean I was one, too? Something went wrong, though. Instead of being carried on the wings of the night, I plummeted like a lead weight into my evergreen bushes. Scratched and bruised, but none the worse for the wear, I tried to explain to the authorities that I was a vampire and could fly. Apparently not; it was pointed out that, along with my bruises and lacerations, I had two very flat cedar bushes. Still, I insisted, and that's how I came to be strapped to a hospital bed.

"Please, just listen to me!" I cried. "There are vampires in Toronto!" I pleaded until I was hoarse, my eyes drifting shut in exhaustion.

Into the room a figure entered. I didn't deign to raise my head to acknowledge this person. What was the point? I felt a cotton swab soaked with cold alcohol daub my arm, then a pin prick.

"Soon, everything will be fine, you'll sleep for a long time. When you wake up, none of this will matter," a soft voice assured.

I froze, then slowly looked over. It was him. I now recognized that smell for what it was, absolute smugness. True to his word, I went to sleep and didn't wake up until months later, tonight.

What's that you say? Do I feel as if he's out to get me? If I answer that in the negative, will you let me go home? Because I really do want to, you know.

I see your eyes; they are full of pity. Stop writing in that notebook and listen to me. Ah, now I have your full attention. Listen, everything I told you was a complete fabrication. I know there are no vampires in Toronto. Really. It was just a momentary delusion.

I admit it now. Just please let me go home. Please.

Life Sentence

by Sandy Adams

Darker justice pursues me
through endless dreams,
dawn to dusk, and I
(fleeing my past)
surrender myself
to its harsh mercy.

Crime And Punishment

by Sandy Adams

I am a black shadow across the moon,
A dark blur in a Toronto alleyway.

I am the frisson of guilt silvering your spine,
a darker angel watching over the innocent.

I am the flash of animal fangs, the feral glow
of golden eyes seeing all your kind
who would hide from justice.

I am on these cold streets, to serve and to protect,
and in my city, crime does not pay.

Bound by Blood II: Retribution

by Eileen Foreman and Frank Seward

Lisa woke in early evening to find herself still held in Vachon's arms. The scent of their previous night's passion tickled her nose and she smiled ruefully as she touched the nearly healed marks on her breast, one of several places his fangs had embedded during their hours of lovemaking that had lasted well into the day. During her training Vachon had, of course, told her the mechanics of vampiric sex; of the intensity and near brutality, of the bloodletting, but nothing could have prepared her for the reality of it. At first she had found it a little frightening, but Vachon had tried to be as gentle as possible and soon her own desire had taken over and she'd simply went with it. She looked at the still-sleeping man beside her, noting with satisfaction the areas where her own canines had scored him. She licked her lips as she recalled the rich, tangy sweetness of his blood. *It's true what they say about Latin lovers*, she thought with amusement.

Vachon stirred and, as his eyes opened, Lisa thought again of how easily she could drown in their liquid-brown depths. "Hello, beautiful," her companion murmured sleepily.

"Hello yourself," she said, snuggling even closer to put her arms around him and kiss him in proper greeting.

Their kiss deepened, tongues fought a mock duel. But when Vachon's eyes started to glaze and his hands began an exploration of their own, Lisa pulled back. "Not just now; I don't want to overdo a good thing."

He hid his disappointment well as she gently disentangled herself and rose to begin picking out her clothing from his in the disarray strewn around them. "Besides, I want to get my stuff back to my place before I go to the club," she added.

"Do you want any help?" Vachon asked, remembering her decision of the night before to return home now that her training was done and the ordeal of bringing her brother's killer to justice was through.

"Thanks, but no. I can manage. Guess I'll see you there later?" she asked as she headed toward her room to gather the rest of her things.

"Sure. Later," Vachon said to her retreating back. He began to dress, more stung than he wanted to admit over her sudden apparent indifference.

Scrape, scrape The man drew his hunting knife over the short length of wood in his hands. *Scrape, scrape*. He trimmed the end down to a keen, sharp point, then tossed it over with the others and picked up another. *Scrape,*

scrape The one he'd just discarded joined the small pile of its companions of white ash. *Scrape, scrape*. Only a few more and he'd be ready. He was a man with a holy mission to fulfill. *Scrape, scrape*.

"Hey, why the long face? What's wrong?" came a voice beside him. Vachon turned to the friend he'd sensed approach. He gave a half-hearted grin and picked up his glass. The noise of the Raven nearly drowned out his mumbled "Nothing" as he took a healthy swallow.

"Come on; I know you better than that. What is it?" the one currently known as Nick Knight cajoled.

Vachon sighed. "It hasn't happened in so long I didn't think it would happen again. At least not this way."

"What happened? What are you talking about?" Nick asked again, now totally mystified.

"I'm starting to feel for someone. I think I'm starting to love her," Vachon finally told him.

"Who? Tracy?"

Vachon shook his head. "She's a wonderful woman, but it's not her."

"One of us then?" Nick paused, and comprehension dawned. "Not ..."

Vachon nodded in admission. "Yes, her. Lisa."

Uh, oh. Trouble, Nick thought to himself. "Does she know? Have you said anything to her?" he said aloud.

"No," Vachon answered. "I didn't realize it myself until tonight."

Nick looked around, taking a few moments to digest this new turn of events. Then he took a seat and began to speak earnestly. "Believe me, I understand the loneliness, but don't you think you're rushing things just a bit? Granted, you've spent a lot of time with her but two weeks ago we didn't even know her."

"You can get to know someone quite well when you spend twenty-four hours a day with them," Vachon retorted.

Nick looked a little stunned. "Have you ...? I mean ..." He broke off, gesturing silently as words failed him.

Knowing exactly what Nick meant, Vachon decided to mercifully let him off the hook. "Not that it's any of your business, but yes," he answered.

Now the conversation took on a more serious tone for Nick. "She's my fledgling and because she's so young, that makes it my business. I don't hold what happened against either of you, but do you think it was wise to start something like that?"

"Hey, don't blame me," protested Vachon. "She came on to me first."

"You could have declined," Nick said, while another part of him wondered when the surprises would stop coming.

"Sure I could have," Vachon snorted. "Have you looked at her - I mean really looked at her? That long silky hair, that perfect figure, that soft brown skin. And her spirit, man! She's beautiful inside and out."

Nick couldn't help but laugh. "Listen to yourself! You sound like a high-school kid with his first crush."

Vachon looked daggers at him, then relented. "Yeah, maybe I do. But I can't help what I feel."

"Do you really know what you feel?" Nick asked, not unkindly. "Do you really care for her or do you want to be with her because you can have with her what you can't have with a mortal?"

The question only added to Vachon's confusion. "I don't know I just don't know," he sighed.

"You need to be sure before you say anything to her," Nick told him as he rose to go. "If you really care for her and the feeling is mutual, then I wish you all the best. But she's been through a lot lately and I don't want to see her hurt again." He leaned closer and his voice took on a harder, warning edge. "I won't see her hurt again. You're my friend, but if you hurt my child, you'll answer to me!"

Nick faded into the crowd, leaving Vachon alone to ponder the question.

Lisa's vacation ended and she returned to her night shift job, falling easily into her new routine: "dinner" and socializing at the Raven before going to work, sleeping during the day as she had before. Only now she sometimes spent her days with Vachon. Their passion remained strong and while he did not encourage the situation, Lisa did not seem to mind his company and he could not find it in himself to turn her away.

The trio were gathered at the bar one night when LaCroix pulled Nick away without a word to the other two. Nick returned with a troubled expression on his face. "One of the dancers, Talya, didn't show up tonight. He sent someone to check on her and they found her dead - staked as she slept," he told them bluntly.

An eerie feeling traveled down Lisa's spine. "Who could have done that? I thought we were safe."

"There's no way to know," Nick answered. "Maybe someone she knew turned on her. Maybe it's just a fluke. It's a shame though; she'd only been brought across a few months ago."

The next night brought even more disturbing news. It seemed Paul, a young acquaintance of Vachon's, had met a similar fate. Like Talya, he had been staked in his sleep and like Talya, he was a fledgling - less than a year in his new life.

Nick didn't need his detective training to see the pattern. It was now clear there was a vampire hunter at work.

"But it doesn't make sense!" Vachon said. "What mortal is crazy enough to believe in vampires now days anyway?"

"Ray did. So did I and so did Tony," Lisa reminded him.

"Well, for obvious reasons, it's not any of you three," Nick said. "For all we know it might not be a mortal at all. Maybe it's one of us gone renegade."

"Someone able to kill in the daylight without being sensed? That's not likely," Vachon answered. "What bothers me most is that both of them were so young. It seems like the fledglings are being targeted. Why?"

"Probably because of the fact that, as youths, they still have a mortal history and are easier to trace," Nick reasoned. "But that still doesn't tell us who." He turned to Lisa with a concerned look. "Until this killer's found, I don't want you to take any chances. I think you should stay here at the club. It's guarded by a trusted few during the day. You'll be safer under LaCroix's protection."

"I appreciate the thought, but unless that's an order I'd rather stay at home," Lisa gently replied. "My security system is more than adequate and I really don't want to let this creep intimidate me."

Nick looked at her with pride, remembering Vachon's words. Spirit, indeed! "No, that wasn't an order. But 'be careful' is. In the meantime, I'm appointing you as her personal bodyguard. Don't let anything happen to her," he said, turning to Vachon.

From then on, Lisa wasn't alone for a minute. Vachon was with her every moment of the days. He escorted her to and from her job and even stayed during working hours; out of sight, of course, but still close enough to sense her. Another fledgling was found murdered, then another, and the uneasiness grew in the community. There was still no clue as to the identity of the killer and LaCroix opened the Raven as a refuge to all who wanted it.



A few nights later, Nick, Vachon and Lisa left the club. The temperature was unseasonably warm and they decided to go for a short walk. They were headed down the street with no particular destination in mind, talking

and laughing and enjoying each other's company, when suddenly three shots rang out. Nick spun around and dropped to one knee, clutching his shoulder. Lisa crumpled to the pavement between them and Vachon felt something whistle through his hair. He extended his senses, then took off in the direction of the heartbeat he detected, only to pull up short when he heard Nick's voice urgently calling him back.

Returning to his friends, he found Lisa in Nick's arms. Her hands were at her midsection and she moaned in pain as the blood pooled beneath her.

"The bullet's still in her. She'll heal but it really should come out," Nick told him in clipped tones. Passing her to Vachon, he continued. "Bring her to Nat's. I'll go on ahead and let her know you're coming." He took to the air, followed moments later by Vachon.

"I'm a pathologist, not a surgeon, Nick! What do you expect me to be able to do?" Natalie exclaimed.

"You're good at cutting and frankly, that's what she needs," Nick countered. He paused, then tried a more reasonable tone. "Please, Nat! She needs you. I need you. She's more than just a friend. She's — mine. I brought her across a few weeks ago."

Natalie's wide, startled eyes caught him like a blow, but any further conversation was terminated by Vachon's arrival. The moment she saw another being in pain, Natalie's medical instincts took over and she quickly cleared a table for Vachon to lay her on.

Grabbing what instruments she thought she'd need, Natalie moved to examine her patient. "Damn! I don't even have any anesthesia," she grumbled.

"She won't need it. Just do what you have to," Vachon said. He leaned over Lisa, blocking her view and their eyes locked. Engaging a vampiric mental technique, he strengthened her will with his, helping her control the pain as Natalie worked to remove the bullet.

When he heard Natalie's "There; got it.", he reached over and picked up a clean scalpel, but stopped when Nick's hand closed over his just as the knife was poised above his wrist.

"Let me," Nick said quietly. Vachon surrendered the instrument without a word. As her master, it was Nick's right.

Nick cut deeply into his forearm, then pressed the dripping wound to the semi-conscious Lisa's lips, softly encouraging her to drink. After a while, he pulled away, accepting the gauze pad Natalie held ready. Lisa would heal quickly now.

"How's your shoulder?" Vachon asked him, somewhat belatedly.

Nick shrugged, his own injury nearly forgotten. "It's fine - clean exit. It's almost healed already."

Natalie of course insisted on checking it out and though he was a little embarrassed by the fuss she made, Nick was touched by her genuine concern.

"So, who's taking pot-shots at you now - a new 'friend' or some kid winged out on dope?" Natalie asked as she worked.

"I don't think so," Vachon jumped in before Nick could speak. "I started to chase them and what I sensed seemed - I don't know ... familiar. Like I'd been around them before."

"Oh, well that certainly narrows it down!" Natalie snapped sarcastically. "How many people have you been around in the last hundred years or so?!"



Safely away from the early sun breaking across the horizon, two figures moved in an ancient dance. Candlelight cast flickering shadows on the wall as their hands traced across the planes, hollows, and curves of each other's bodies, eliciting soft gasps and low moans of desire. The shadows parted slightly and one rose above the other. She straddled his slender hips, a rider on a fiery stallion. His hands gripped the bedside; she teased his maleness with slow, caressing thrusts. His body trembled and rose, reaching for her but she would not let him claim her. Bending low now, she gently nuzzled his skin - the cheek, his neck, nipping her way downward. Suddenly he groaned in pleasure/pain as she sank her teeth into his chest. She drank deeply for a moment then her mouth met his again, passing his own blood back to him. He wrapped his arms around her, forcing her to the bed and rolling atop her in one smooth motion. He entered her swiftly, fully. Animal-like growls, savage and yet somehow non-threatening, echoed in the air around them as he thrust hard within her. Her fingers tangled in his hair and she pulled his head to her. He plunged his fangs into her neck, feeling hers strike home at the same moment. The mutual sharing heightened their already fervent passion. His body strove for release and they found it together, crying out in their ecstasy as they rode the tail of the comet.

Reality righted itself slowly. Looking tenderly at the woman still in his arms, Vachon decided to speak what was in his heart. "I never thought I'd

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Reality righted itself slowly. Looking tenderly at the woman still in his arms, Vachon decided to speak what was in his heart. "I never thought I'd

meet someone like you, but I'm glad I did. It scared me the other night when you got hurt. You could have been put out of commission long enough to be killed. I could have lost you and I don't want that to happen. I know this is sudden, Lisa, but I want you with me. I think I'm in love with you and I'd like us to share our lives together for a couple of hundred years - or longer," his gentle, compelling voice flowed through her like warm honey.

Lisa returned his gaze, keeping her expression carefully neutral while her insides tied themselves in knots. *Damn and double damn! What have I done?* her mind screamed out. Her hand caressed the stubble of beard she found so irresistibly sexy and she again fought against the whirlpool-like pull of his gorgeous, chocolate eyes. "Vachon —" she began, then faltered before she was able to continue. "Dear Javier. I can't tell you how much I care about you, too. You've been so kind and wonderful to me, but - there's been too many changes in my life already and I just couldn't take on a commitment like you're talking about. It wouldn't work. I can't give you what you want," she finished quietly.

"What I want is you! We're together so much anyway, why not just make it permanent. We're good together - mentally, emotionally, sexually. Why can't we just —"

Lisa laid a finger on his lips, stopping his breathless protest. "We are good together," she agreed. "But — admit it, we both know that Tracy is the one you really care for. It's still possible that one day she might ask to be brought over, and I'd never stand between you two." Her finger trailed a path down his body. "But until - and unless - that happens, nothing has to change between us. Nothing ... it's your choice."

Vachon pulled her closer and held her tightly, closing his eyes on the pain he felt inside. If he couldn't have what he wanted, then he'd take what he could get. The natural cycle of the day claimed them and they slipped quietly into the sleep of the dead.

Lisa woke with a terrified shout. Knotted stomach muscles flung her upper body bolt upright. Damp sheets clung irritatingly to the blood-sweat sheen that covered her body. Startled to wakefulness, Vachon sat up beside her. "Lisa! What's wrong?!"

Lisa sprang from the bed, fighting to see through the red haze covering her vision and dressed with lightening speed. "Nicholas!" she gasped, running to her closet. "He's in trouble! I've got to go to him!" Frantically, she tore through the garments and found the one she was looking for - a

long, heavy, hooded cloak she had last worn to a medieval renaissance festival.

"Lisa, wait! It's not dark yet. You'll be fried!" Vachon warned, but it was too late. She was already out the door. Vachon wanted desperately to follow her but knew he could not. He didn't have even her scant protection and after five hundred years, the instinct for self-preservation was too strong. He could only pace and worry.

Lisa flew high, higher, into the late afternoon sky, sacrificing precious seconds in the hope that the mortals below would be too caught up in their earthbound lives to notice a strange figure at such altitude. Deadly rays prickled her skin and she smelled her own flesh burning. She streaked in the direction of Nicholas' loft.

With the sound of shattered glass and the screech of rent metal, she crashed through the skylight of Nick's home. She landed heavily on all fours but jumped instantly to her feet, Nick's screams of agony ringing in her ears. Throwing back her hood, she saw a figure bent over him, holding him pinned with a large, ornate cross that charred its way into his flesh.

Hearing the intrusion, the man looked up then turned his back on the elder vampire as he advanced toward her, holding the cross out before him.

Pure desire to aid her master blunted Lisa's racial aversion to the holy symbol. She stepped forward, then circled slightly, trying to distract him further. The vampire was upon her stronger than it had ever been. Her eyes shot fire; extended fangs gnashed the air. Her black cape and the smoke rising from her sun-touched skin added to the illusion that she had just stepped from the depths of Hades itself.

Behind the attacker, she saw Nick roll to the floor and slowly pull himself up. "Why do you try to destroy us? We've done nothing to you," Lisa snarled, hoping to center his full attention on her.

Before the assailant could answer, Nick grabbed him from behind, holding his arm in such a way as to prevent any more attacks with the crucifix. At the same moment, Lisa executed a perfect roundhouse kick and the cross flew through the air, landing on the floor and skidding a safe distance away.

Nick's features were a fair match for Lisa's. "Now it is you who shall die!" he growled. His head went back but before he could strike, the man drove his elbow into Nick's ribcage, knocking the wind out of him and dropping him to the floor.

Lisa leapt for the hunter but, unarmed and outnumbered, the man had no wish to stay and fight. He turned and fled from the apartment.

Lisa's leap carried her to Nick's side. "Master!" she cried, unconsciously using the title for the first time since her conversion. "Nicholas, are you all right?"

Nick crawled into a chair and leaned back weakly. He closed his robe tightly over the mark that had been burned into his chest, thereby avoiding any more adverse reaction for either of them. "Yes, I'm okay. I'll be fine in a little while," he managed to say.

Lisa crouched beside him, laying a hand on his shoulder. Nick felt her support and caring through her touch and smiled his thanks. She stretched out her other arm in front of him, wrist upturned. "You helped me heal," she reminded softly. "Drink, now."

Nick's automatic refusal died on his lips when he saw the sincerity in her eyes. He took her arm and slid his teeth gently into her soft flesh, savoring the healing flow a few minutes before releasing her.

With their frayed nerves calmed a bit, Lisa asked, "I had this sudden, clear sense that you were in danger - but how? How could I know that?"

"It's a bond that's not uncommon between parent and fledgling," Nick explained. "Particularly when the fledgling is very young and there has been a full exchange of blood. It's a link that allows either one to feel the strong emotions of the other."

"So it works both ways? That means you can ..."

Nick smiled indulgently. "Yes - I know when you and Vachon are together. But don't be embarrassed; it's nothing to be ashamed of. This link is different from a blood-bond. It will probably fade as you get older. Anyway, I'm glad you came. That was a pretty good move you did. I didn't know you knew martial arts."

Lisa gave him a look of surprise, then dissolved into helpless giggles. "I don't," she gasped. "I just watch the movies." Nick's laughter joined hers and it was several minutes before they were able to speak.

Finally composing herself, Lisa asked, "Speaking of Vachon, can I use your phone?" She dialed her number and, hearing him, said, "Yes, I'm all right. We both are. Meet us at the club as soon as you can. There's something we have to talk about. We — we know who the killer is."



"That can't be - it's impossible!" LaCroix declared. "I wiped his memory."

"Tony had us all fooled, LaCroix. None of us knew he's a resistor," Nick said. "He confessed to killing Ray in order to trick us into revealing ourselves. He's an excellent reporter and an even better actor."

"He's also quite mad," Vachon added. "Just as Lisa risked her life to help us, he'll take any risk to destroy us. Now that we know it's him, he'll be even more dangerous."

"That will end shortly. The Enforcers will take care of him now," LaCroix told them.

"No, LaCroix! You can't do that," Lisa blurted. LaCroix's icy glare and Vachon's touch on her arm warned her she was treading on dangerous ground but, secure in the knowledge of her immunity to him, she continued. "You gave me your word no more mortals would die if they found out about us. Let him be brought over or put away so he can't do anymore harm, but there's been enough death."

LaCroix's gaze grew even more threatening and Lisa felt a shiver of fear, despite her protected status. "Do you dare to question me? I promised I would not kill for that reason, but the Code must be upheld. He will be disposed of," LaCroix emphasized.

Her bluff called, Lisa had to back-pedal a little. "You tried to kill my brother and I'll never forgive you for that —" LaCroix started toward her and Lisa fell back a few steps. Nick stepped between them, feeling the imminent explosion. "— but I respect the Code and your position in our community. Something has to be done, but there's got to be another way. Let me talk to him; maybe he'll listen to me ..." She trailed off, unsure of how to get through to him.

Nick spread his hands in a gesture of appeal. "Please, LaCroix. If there's a chance, then let her try. It can't hurt. Please?"

LaCroix looked from one to the other, then hissed in frustration. "Very well, I'll play your little game. But be warned; you have one night - tonight only. The Enforcers arrive tomorrow."

The three turned and left the room. Standing alone, LaCroix cursed himself for his momentary weakness. Oh well - what could she do in one night? He firmly squashed his feeling of indulgent compassion but though he would not admit it even to himself, he knew that, in the end, he could deny nothing to Nicholas, not even that ridiculous quest for mortality.

Outside the Raven, Nick caught Lisa's arm. "You've bought some time, but what are you going to do now?"

"You agreed I should talk to him and that's exactly what I intend to do," Lisa answered.

"I only did that to divert LaCroix's anger from you," said Nick. "You'd be crazy to get near Tony. He's too dangerous and you know he wouldn't listen to reason."

"I've got to talk to him. I've got to try," she insisted.

"We'll go with you then," offered Vachon.

Lisa hugged them both, the sadness in her voice belying her warm smile. "No. You can't endanger yourselves on my account. This is just between Tony and me. Perhaps it always was." She took to the air and Nick and Vachon went back inside to wait for her return, hoping against hope that she would return.



In the darkened room, Lisa studied the sleeping figure on the bed. She had not been entirely honest with her friends. She knew there were only two options open to her; one she could not do, the other she would not. *Talk about the proverbial rock and a hard place*, she thought wryly. She approached the bed, only to fall back, gagging, when she caught the disgusting stench. Glancing down she saw the garlic cloves on the floor, encircling his bed. She thought for a moment, then levitated to the ceiling. She moved over the bed and began her descent.

Tony stirred in his sleep and rolled over. Lisa was forced to withdraw again when she saw the crucifix hung around his neck. She retreated to the door to regroup. *Damn! This is getting irritating!*

Then a flash of inspiration struck. 'To defeat an enemy, you must first know it,' Vachon had told her the night he'd forced her to face the dark side of her nature. How well could she know this killer's mind? She called to him. "Tony. TONY! Wake up."

Tony sat up, then panicked when he saw her. Lisa began talking quickly before he could say or do anything. "I didn't come to hurt you. Just listen to me. I want your help and there's not much time. I know why you killed Ray. And the others - that was you, too, wasn't it? You're trying to rid the world of an evil; I understand that. That's why I'm here - to offer myself. I want you to kill me, Tony. Get rid of another demon."

"You're lying," Tony accused. "No vampire would ask to die. You're on their side! What about that little stunt at your place? And why did you protect the blond one - Nick?"

"I had to. Vachon controls my mind; my will. He made me say those things. He forced me into the sun to protect Nick instead of going himself," Lisa answered, the lies coming fast and thick.

"I don't believe it. If he controls you, how can you be here now? Did he send you?"

"His control slipped while he was hunting tonight. He'll realize it soon and call me back to him. That's why you must hurry!" Lisa tried frantically to convince Tony without giving him time for clear thought.

"No, it's a trick! But I'll tell you what; leave your door open tomorrow and I'll finish you the same way I did the others."

"That won't work," Lisa insisted, tears welling on cue in her eyes. "He'll be with me then and you'll never have time to get both of us."

Something inside Tony snapped. "You mean that monster makes you sleep with him? He uses you?"

"I can't help it. I told you ..." Lisa began crying softly. *No lie there*, she thought. She was always helpless under Vachon's terminal good-looks and powerful sensuality.

"You poor thing. I can't believe what they've done to you," Tony crooned, finally starting to come around. He got up and walked to the garlic perimeter.

"I can't stand what's been happening since I was made into this. Please, Tony, end it now. Let me join my brother," Lisa continued her persuasion.

Tony moved cautiously to the dresser and pulled out a hammer and stake. Lisa let him approach until she instinctively had to pull back from the crucifix.

"The cross!" she said in a tight voice. "The vampire in me won't let you get close enough. You'll have to take it off."

"No way, bitch! I'm not that stupid. I take this off and you'll tear me to pieces," Tony answered, his certainty wavering.

Lisa went slowly to her knees and crossed her wrists behind her. "I won't kill you, Tony. We were friends before all this. If you ever liked me - if you have an ounce of compassion - do it now before he controls me again and it's too late," she begged.

Tony hesitated, but his madness drove him on. Laying down the weapons, he unhooked the chain and dropped it to the floor.

With the hindrance gone, Lisa moved like lightening. Vaulting behind him, she drove her canines deep, easily restraining his efforts to escape. Her first taste of human blood sent a wave of giddiness through her that she struggled to control. She fed rapidly at first, then slowed when she felt

his heartbeat begin to falter. *Thump....thump*. Vachon had told her of the method to this art as well, though she had planned never to use it. She just hoped she could pull it off. *Thump.... thump*. 'It's a fine line of technique. You can't take too much.' She recalled Nick's words from his account of his own disastrous first attempt. *Thump....* She pulled away, panting, and sat back on her heels. Wiping her mouth, she looked at the unconscious man. Nothing to do now but wait. Had she been successful?

Lisa made her way through the crowd. She parked the one she held in tow at the bar and turned to face her friends. "Mission accomplished. He won't hurt any more of us," she said, the night's strain evident in her words. Nick and Vachon simply stared at the new addition before turning away from him in disgust.

Though just a babe of the community herself, Lisa took her new responsibilities seriously. With her friends' help she taught him the ways of the night, as she herself had been taught. She protected Tony against those who still would have seen him destroyed, leaving him in Vachon's care when she could not be with him. Her mentors hadn't exactly approved of her action, but they understood that she couldn't have done any differently.

"Why won't they accept me?" Tony whined to her one night. "You're friends with everyone - why don't they like me?"

"Not even you can be that stupid," snapped Lisa. "You killed the child of an Ancient, murdered infants of our society, then tried to destroy The Master's favoured son and you wonder why no one wants anything to do with you!"

"But that was before. I'm one of your kind now. Can't they be my friends instead of wanting me dead?"

"Shut up, you simpering idiot!" Lisa screamed, her pent-up anger exploding violently. "If anyone should want you dead, it's me. You killed my brother - tried to kill my master! But I saved you from the death you gave us and this is what I get!" Her voice dropped; she shook her head in defeat. "I should have released LaCroix from his vow and let him kill you."

"Don't say that, Lisa. You sound like you don't even care what happens to me," Tony was nearly groveling now.

Lisa's head snapped up. Her eyes glowed and it was the vampire's voice that echoed from her throat. "I don't," she said harshly. "I can't stand

the thought of you. The sight of you sickens me. You can go face the sun for all I care, but if you die it will be by your own hand - not by those you tried to destroy. This is your punishment, you see - to be outcast among us, belonging to neither world."



The nights passed and it seemed one crises followed another. Nick was badly hurt on the job and for a while didn't even know any of them. Another investigation put him at an exorcism which led to a possession that almost drove him to kill again.

Then came word of a strange virus that seemed to affect only vampires. This was greeted first by skepticism, then growing alarm as the illness spread. Screed was the first to go and the death toll mounted rapidly. "A dozen in a single night," Lisa heard LaCroix say one evening. Word was passed for all of their kind to avoid contact with any others. But it was too late for her; she'd already contracted it during her latest tryst with Vachon, before he'd known he was infected.

She knew Nick and Natalie were searching frantically for a cure and as she lay alone, battling the hunger and the fever, she wondered if it would come in time. Had she been granted immortality only to have it snatched away so soon and in such an undignified manner?

"Give me your arm," Nick said.

Curious, yet trusting his friend completely, Vachon did as Nick told him.

Nick emptied the contents of the syringe into Vachon's vein. In a short time Vachon felt the fever break; felt the killer plague die within him.

"AIDS blood," Nick answered his unspoken question. "The virus this thing was meant for kills it instead." He gave Vachon two more vials. "Take these for Lisa and Tony. LaCroix will help me with the rest."

Lisa felt one of her kind near and growled a warning as she tried to rise. She fell back when she caught the scent of redwood and spice that was her lover. Then Vachon was beside her; the antidote flowing into her.

When she was able to travel, they sped to Tony's home. The locked door gave easily to preternatural strength and they hurried to the bedroom. Vachon stopped abruptly in the doorway. Peering over his shoulder, Lisa

saw that they were too late. The still form on the bed was beyond help of any kind.

"Damn it - no!" Lisa choked. She'd hated the man, but she hated death even more. "I saved him from one death only to give him another."

Vachon turned and pulled her into his arms. "It wasn't your fault. You couldn't have known this would happen," he soothed. "It was his desire for the destruction of others that finally led to his own."



Vachon had insisted on burying Screed alone, but later took Nick and Lisa there to say their own good-byes. "He could be an odd sort sometimes, but he was my friend for centuries," he said, his voice thick with emotion. Lisa nodded and squeezed his hand in sympathy. She pressed the 'play' button of the recorder she carried and the haunting strains of The Little River Band's "Cool Change" filled the air:

I was born in the sign of water
And it's there that I feel my best
The albatross and the whales;
They are my brothers
It's kind of a special feeling
When you're out on the sea alone
Staring at the full moon like a lover.

It was the most fitting tribute to his memory she could think of.



Far away, on the other side of town, Tony lay in a similar unmarked grave. He was, however, unmourned. Peace and safety had finally returned to their community. Perhaps now it would stay - at least for a while.

For Nicholas

by Lisa Curtis

I sought your friend out one moonlit night
He did not know my name
Told him to bring you so we could talk, that's right
My life has since not been the same

Demanding? Selfish? Deceitful?, yes - I was all those things and
more

But it was for the greater good
Forced by threats and circumstance to do, that which you abhor
Then later you understood

You drank my blood reluctantly; ended my mortal days
And left me in his care
You didn't know, my friend, it was your kind I wanted to save
Against a dread nightmare

Now the madman's dead and we are safe, the threat is finally
gone

There's nothing to come after
But I beg you, Nicholas, don't rue this thing that for me you've
done

I'm proud to call you Master

Forever a (K)night

by Teresa Guinn-Garcia

Who is this knight
Dark Lord or white?

He avoids religious icons,
Yet, in mirror, without fear of same,
Leaves he image of self as one.

Transparent is his ability to blend
Quick his with to comment
Though lurk he in darkest of corners
He is able still to leave a shadow faint upon end.

How might all of this be so?
Ask but a vampyre
For only he shall be one to know.

Working by night,
Taking rest by day,
Revering, seeking to help all
That is remotely human along the way.

Desiring most to be mortal, to be human again,
Lest craving what he must have most
The "wine of immortality" therein.

Is it possible for such a creature to find true mortal to love?
In search by near ground or wicked, starry sky
above?

Must he humor, appease one's soul
To regain, by fate or some mere cure, real "touch"
with light
Or shall he eternally remain
Forever - and in a (k)night??

Descent

by Bettie J. Brown

"I hate to fly!" Detective Nicholas Knight whispered to himself for the umpteenth time during the long night flight from Toronto to Los Angeles. Try as he might, there had been no way to get out of prisoner escort duty this time. Captain Reese had only given in on one point, a rapid turnaround. All he had to do was drop off the prisoner and return on the red-eye flight the next night. No long layover. Straight there and practically straight back, with the department picking up the tab for a night's stay at one of the airport motels. A piece of cake. Yeah, right, as Schanke would say.

Schanke. Nick still felt a twinge of loneliness every time he thought of his late partner. His best friend. A madman's bomb on a night flight to Edmonton had abruptly ended their partnership. Nick was only now coming to terms with the guilt he'd felt over Schanke's death. *I should have been on that flight instead . . . No, I'm not going to get caught up in playing that game again.* Hindsight was a great teacher.

The prisoner he was escorting, one Luis Alvarez, was a gang-banger who had killed a rival gang leader and escaped to Toronto to avoid retaliation. Barely twenty, Alvarez had been suspected of at least six other murders, the first when he was only fourteen. He sat next to Nick, defiant, surly, and without an ounce of remorse. The only guilt he felt was of being caught by the police.

"You always talk to yourself, cop?" Nick ignored his charge's question. "Maybe you need to get a less stressful job, man. You let me walk and my homies will make it worth your while. L.A. cops don't make shit, so I know you Canadians don't make nothing." Nick continued to look out the window. "Look at me, Man! I'm talking to you!" Nick slowly turned to face Alvarez and eyed him coldly, silently. "No bullshit, Man! All you have to do is let me go and you're rich!" Nick's eyes hardened. Alvarez suddenly became filled with an overwhelming fear. This was someone you didn't want to mess with. Nick turned back to the window. Alvarez released the breath he didn't know he was holding, then took in a few more for good measure. "Okay, have it your own way." No more words were exchanged between them for the rest of the flight.

The plane landed on schedule at three AM, a good omen. Two Los Angeles detectives met them at the airport and they were taken to the Mid-Town Division Police Headquarters. An hour later, his duty discharged, Nick was looking forward to a good day's rest before returning to Toronto.

As he was leaving the station, Knight happened to cross the path of his former charge as they were taking him back to lock-up before his trip downtown to City Jail. Alvarez purposely blocked his way, eyes glittering malevolently at Nick in the dimly lit station. "You should have let me walk, man," he snarled. "I told my homies about you. You're a dead man." The officer in charge pulled him away. Alvarez pivoted, once again faced Nick, raised an imaginary gun at the detective and fired. He laughed as the uniformed officer continued pulling him toward lock-up. Luis yelled one last time, "You're dead!" His threat echoed in the newly created silence.

Nick felt a comforting hand on his shoulder as he stood looking after the departing Alvarez. It was Davis, one of the detectives who had met them at LAX. "He's full of it. It's just impotent posturing to impress his homeboys, that's all."

"His is not the first threat I've received, and it won't be the last. It's all part of the job."

"That's the spirit. Fuck the little bastard. What motel you staying at?" Nick gave him the name. "Not too bad. At least it's close to the station, and besides, you're only staying one night. You're probably the only customer not paying by the hour."

The drive to the motel was pleasant. Davis reminded him of Schanke. Having been a cop in L.A. for more than twenty years, Davis had no illusions. His comments were insightful and wittily sarcastic. Nick respectfully listened as Davis droned on.

Nick hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep until he heard Davis remark, "Here we are. I guess it's time I got off my soapbox." Knight could feel the dawn approaching and the familiar weariness it brought. It had been a long night and, contrary to popular belief, even vampires were subject to jet lag.

"I appreciate the ride. Thanks."

"No problem, the brotherhood of the badge and all that."

As Nick was getting out of the car, he noticed a late-model dark blue Chevy drive past them. Its occupants were all young men in their late teens or early twenties. Knight felt a tingle up his spine; his cop's instincts had been alerted. But the car never slowed. It continued on up the street and turned the corner.

Nick started toward the motel lobby, sidestepping an engrossed couple. He smiled and shook his head ruefully. Apparently Davis was right about the motel's accommodations. When he turned to wave his final farewell, Nick saw the same blue Chevy round the corner and come speeding up the

street. In a flash, he called a warning to Davis and pushed the couple out of the line of fire clearly meant for him.

Burning pain lanced through his chest and abdomen. His view changed abruptly as he felt himself falling unceremoniously to the concrete sidewalk. His head hit hard, dazing him.

Something wasn't quite right here. The bullets should have passed through. Instead, he had been felled by them as if he were an ordinary mortal. LaCroix would have been amused. The thought made Nick feel like laughing out loud, but it only came out as a soft croak.

Davis bent over him, face full of concern. "Hang in there, Knight, you're going to be okay." Nick could hear him on the squawk box calling for an ambulance. He wanted to let Davis know how hilarious the situation was, but he couldn't speak. "Knight, can you hear me? An ambulance is on its way — Knight!"

"What a fine mess you've gotten yourself into, partner!" It was Schanke. Schanke was bending over him wearing his usual expression of irreverence. "I leave you alone for a few months and look what happens."

The face before him blurred and was once again was Davis. His voice sounded strange, almost indistinct. "Jesus, you're so cold! Here, my jacket will keep you warm." Nick felt the jacket as Davis lay in gently across him. He tried to raise his head and thank him, but it weighed a ton.

"Just let go, Nicholas. It's time. Just let go and join me in the light." The light! It should be nearing daybreak. Erica smiled down at him and he returned her smile, then blacked out, perhaps forever.

Nick was jolted awake by the stretcher being hurriedly pushed into an ambulance, only to black out again.

Distant voices were heard discussing him, but returning to consciousness seemed such a bother. The darkness felt safe and comfortable.

"What have we got?"

"Canadian cop gets shot in a drive-by a couple of hours after stepping off the plane."

"Ouch. Welcome to L.A."

"He has two GSW's to the chest, one in the abdomen. The one to the abdomen's still there."

"Fluids are wide open and we have him on pressors, but the BP's still low."

"Where's the Surgical Resident?"

"On her way."

"How are his gasses?"

"Crappy. We'll have to tube him."

"Okay, let's go. Give me a number eight."

"You got it."

"It's in. Check the tube ... breath sounds? Okay — hook him up. Come on, buddy, work with us. Damn, he's crumping! Just look at that rhythm. Call the O.R. and tell them we have a Red Blanket coming in hot. And make sure the Surgical Resident meets us there! This guy's out of time!" The overhead lights whisked by; he was being moved again.

"Okay, on three. One .. two .. three." Knight was lifted onto a table. Masked people looked down on him. *No! I don't need this! You don't understand.* He tried to call out, but he was prevented by the tube in his throat. Gentle but firm hands placed him in restraints.

"Mr. Knight? I'm your anesthesiologist. I'm going to put you to sleep now." Nick tried to move, tried to make them understand he wasn't like them, but communication was impossible. He felt so strange — as if his spirit was being separated from his body. Again the darkness claimed him.

Snakes. He could sense them crawling all over his body, flowing in and out of him. And the noise. So many beeps and whistles. A deafening clamor. He was choking, a snake was crawling down his throat, trying to smother him. Nick tried to remove it, but his hands were held fast. A temporary inconvenience. A tug and he was free. The offending creature was removed and smashed against the wall. An alarm rang out and betrayed him by summoning aid.

By the time the doctors and nurses arrived, Nick had managed to get to his feet, snapping IV lines in his wake.

"Mr. Knight! Don't pull out those lines. Mr. Knight, please. You're at Cedars-Sinai Hospital. You've been shot. We are only trying to help you. Please don't ..." He felt so woozy, unable to distinguish which of the group had spoken to him. A suspicious voice rose from within, warning him not to trust them. They were trying to hurt him. They were the ones responsible for keeping him here tied to lines that monitored, dripped, drained and measured.

"You don't understand. I'm fine. I don't need all this!" Nick shouted at them, but no one was listening. "These readings are normal for me. I'm — different from you. You must let me go!" He pleaded with them, but no one would understand.

What had they given him? He should be healed by now and feeling much stronger. He looked down at his arms; broken IV lines trailed from them like plastic spaghetti. Pain. Weakness. Nick closed his eyes for a

moment, to dispel the light show. When he opened them again, yellow, blue and white lights still swirled around, obscuring his vision.

"Mr. Knight — Nicholas — Nick. Please allow us to help you." One of the nurses stepped forward, open-handed. She must have been chosen because she looked the least threatening. Barely five feet tall, with dark brown hair and eyes, she resembled a child reaching out for her father when she extended her hand toward Nick.

"I know this must all be new and confusing to you," she began in a placating tone. "Do you remember what happened?"

"No," he croaked hoarsely, massaging his sore throat. "How long have I been here?"

"You are in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. You were shot. One bullet lodged near your spine and was removed by emergency abdominal surgery only three hours ago. I don't know how you're standing, but believe me, Nick, you're very ill. The tube you pulled out was helping you to breathe. The lines in your arms were feeding you, providing pain medication and maintaining your blood pressure. You need all of these things. Please, Nick, allow us to help you."

"I don't need your help! I'm fine." Nick winced in pain, belying the truth of his statement. The doctors and nurses tried to use his moment of weakness to close in. Nick grabbed an IV pole. Backed against the wall, he brandished it like a weapon and stared defiantly at his would-be caretakers. If only he didn't feel so dizzy. "Where's Natalie? She'll tell you. I'm perfectly fine."

"We are not trying to hurt you, Nick," their spokesperson quickly reassured him. "We are only trying to help. Who's Natalie? What's her last name? Perhaps if we had more information we could contact her."

It was becoming difficult to concentrate. What had they given him? "Natalie — Natalie Lambert. She's my doctor ... my friend. She's ..." *It's so warm in this place.* Nick wiped the perspiration from his forehead and looked at his hand in amazement. It was clear! His skin was warm to the touch. Vertigo and nausea struck suddenly and he pitched forward into the waiting arms of his would-be saviors.

"God, he's barely breathing. Get an intubation tray."

"Already at the bedside."

"How are his vitals?"

"BP's dropped again, and we've restarted the pressors."

"I don't want to take any chances with this guy again. I want him kept immobilized and sedated."

Olga, the nurse who'd tried to calm Nick earlier, checked her patient's progress. The ventilator hissed as it forced air into his lungs. She examined Nick's lines with quiet efficiency. The medication was doing its job; he was effectively immobilized and sedated. However, the restraints remained in place, just in case. She lay a gentle hand on his forehead. The things that were necessary to safeguard a patient sometimes seemed cruel. "It's okay, Nick," she said as she continued to stroke his forehead. "We'll take good care of you."

Heat seared his lungs as the ventilator forced him to breathe in unfamiliar patterns. The combination of drugs in his system were playing havoc with his senses. Jumbled images flooded his feverish brain. Enemies and loved ones, past and present, blended their voices into a shrill symphony of confusion.

"My poor Nikola." His mother looked down in sympathy on her son. Her hand soothingly stroked his brow. "My poor, poor boy. There is no need for you to suffer like this. Come away with me, child. Leave this place."

"I doubt he'll be able to join you, Madame," LaCroix's familiar voice cut in. "He's destined for a hotter climate. Wouldn't you say, Nicholas?"

"Oh, back off, fang-face! Nick Boy's coming with me. That's what partners are for." Schanke gave him the thumbs-up sign and winked reassurance.

"The only place he's going to is a spot on my mantel — just the head," Alexandra sneered.

"... he's coming with me!"

"No! He's going with me!"

Nick endured the tug-of-war for his soul. Who would win? Who cared? "Doctor, I think we need to increase the medication. Mr. Knight's pulling at his restraints again."

"All right, and increase the sedation as well." The resident regarded his patient and shook his head. "Work with us, Knight. We're trying to save you."

"Burn the Witch! Burn the Witch!" The chanting crowd was close on his heels, calling out for his blood as Nicholas ran for his life. Death by fire was his greatest fear. No matter how far or fast he ran, he was unable to elude his pursuers. There should have been an easier method of escape, but he was unable to recall. Nicholas ran on, his heart pounding and his breath coming in painful, jagged intervals. Terror ranged freely within, as the voices of the crowd came nearer and nearer. Unable to run any further,

Nicholas sank to his knees and awaited the inevitable. Hands reached out for him from the unrecognizable mass of flesh. Nicholas covered his face, shielding his view from the fate that beckoned him.

Click. The scene abruptly changed, as if someone had flicked the channel selector on a television set. Nicholas found himself standing alone in the desert. Before him lay a field of crosses stretching to the horizon. "These are the souls of your victims. You have much to atone for."

"Guide? Is that you?"

"You have called me so in the past — that will be sufficient. We meet again, Nicholas de Brabant."

"So it would seem. Does this mean I'm dead?"

"Not yet. Once again you stand at the crossroads. You must choose."

"Am I closer to forgiveness? Is that why this has happened?"

"Look upon the field. Your victims still sleep, awaiting justice. Nothing has changed."

"Then why am I here?"

"Only you can answer that question." The guide, still wearing LaCroix's face, smiled gently and faded away, leaving Nicholas alone to contemplate his own personal Flanders Field.

"You promised we'd be together forever," Alissa looked at him with sad eyes.

"How many have died to feed your monstrous appetite?" Hans Victor taunted.

"And they gave you a badge," the Mortician scoffed.

"Does anyone really care when a killer dies?" Amanda Cohen shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

"Don't you dare give up on me! Don't you dare leave me!" Natalie's face was before him. The scene had changed again; they were in his apartment. "Do I mean so little to you, that you'd give up without fighting to stay with me?"

"Nat ..." he caught her up in his arms. She pulled away angrily from his embrace, then turned to face him.

"If you truly love me, fight! Fight for the chance that someday we can be together. Please, Nick! Nick!"

"Nick! Nick, can you hear me? It's Natalie. I'm here, Nick. It will be all right now. I'm here to help you out of this nightmare." Natalie closed her hands over one of Nick's, praying human contact would break through his drug-induced haze. The doctors, by pure chance, had lucked onto the one combination of drugs that would affect a Vampire: a neurotransmitter

and a curare derivative. No wonder Nick was in the state he was in. "Boy, oh boy, Nick. We are in serious trouble. Nurse! I want to see Mr. Knight's chart. I'm Dr. Lambert, his personal physician," she added when the nurse looked doubtful.

"Thank you." As Natalie read the history of Nick's hospital stay, she became more and more alarmed. "Nurse, I want to talk to the resident. Now!" She stifled a yawn as she watched the nurse hurry off to fulfill her request. She'd gotten on the first available flight when informed of Nick's injury, and desperately needed sleep. But not before she got more information. "Don't worry, Nick," she said as she patted his hand. "I'll get you out of this."

Once again, Nick found himself in the desert overlooking the bleak landscape of crosses pointing accusingly toward the sky. So many had given their lives so that he might live. How dare he be so arrogant as to believe his life was worth more than theirs.

A figure slowly emerged from the field of crosses, a vaguely familiar young man. Nick was struck by the innocence and purity of the spirit which radiated from the approaching figure, only to be stunned when he recognized his own face. This was Nicholas de Brabant before his service to Lord Delabar in Wales. Before the Crusades. Before LaCroix and his forever damnation.

The shade of his former self stopped before him. The two men eyed one another silently. Nick looked upon his other self with wonder. Had he truly ever been that innocent? That open? How far he had fallen.

"Why did you destroy me, Nicholas?" his past self questioned. "What happened to make you abandon your soul and embrace the darkness?" There was no anger, no accusatory tone. The question was stated with the incurious calm of a child.

"I ..." Nicholas stopped, a denial already on his lips. Denials came so readily, but this person before him needed the truth. Nicholas took in a deep breath and composed himself. "It didn't happen all at once. It happened gradually. When I first entered the service of Lord Delabar, I was sure that our mission to Wales was a righteous one. But after meeting the people, I began to question our right to impose our beliefs on others in their own land. A fatal error. They killed the woman I loved and framed me for the murder. I was 'rescued' by the Church and sent to the Holy Lands as penance. The journey there was brutal. Only one in three survived to reach Jerusalem. But it gave me time to think, to realize what had truly occurred in Wales, and I swore I would survive!" The anger and bitterness rose to

the surface as he remembered the faces of his fallen comrades. "We were lambs sent to be slaughtered time and time again. In a war that profited no one but the Church! Solved no problems Changed — NOTHING!!"

Nicholas trembled with rage. "After seeing so much death and the suddenness with which it came, I no longer believed in anything but my own continued existence. God, morality — empty words drowned in the blood and screams of the dead and dying on the battlefield. The things we did ... LaCroix didn't take my soul. I lost in the Holy Lands when I committed atrocities in the name of God and for the glory of the Holy See. When Janette finally came along, I was a lying, rutting, conscienceless, depraved killing machine. Certain I would never leave the Holy Lands alive. Tomorrow. The next day. It was only a matter of time. LaCroix offered me life everlasting then. Not in the afterlife, but here, on earth. I jumped at the chance, heedless of the consequences. I was a fool. I offer no excuses."

"But you were a knight, sworn to serve God and the Church. You abandoned your faith. Your God!"

"God abandoned me! Or so I once thought. I was disillusioned. I felt I'd been played for a fool by the Church. You're right. The blight on my soul came from within, not without. I alone am responsible for my own choices.

"Well said, Nicholas de Brabant." Nick whirled. The Guide had returned. He turned back to face his former self in time to see him fade from existence, taking his innocence with him. "You have learned much since our last encounter. However, you still have a great deal to learn."

"Then you are saying I must go back again? It's not yet my time?"

"That is for you to decide. I leave you to your decision." And he was gone.

"Natalie," Nick managed to murmur. He swallowed and attempted to clear his throat before calling out again, "Natalie."

"I'm here, Nick." She reached out of the blurry haze and let him feel her comforting grasp.

"Where's here?"

"Toronto. You're home. I was able to get you transferred back home, and none too soon."

"I second that," LaCroix chimed in.

"Oh, you're here."

"Where else would I be?"

"We're both here, Nick. You get some rest. We'll talk later." Nick nodded once and drifted back into sleep. To LaCroix, she continued, "Who'd

have thought an L.A. gang would use garlic-laced hollow points as a signature. Thanks for your help there. I'm afraid medicines and equipment designed to heal ordinary humans was having the opposite effect on Nick."

"We always help our own. Our brethren in Los Angeles were most accommodating. As soon as they were aware of the situation, steps were taken to assure our secrecy was maintained. Poor Nicholas, your fascination with humanity always costs you dearly."

"That fascination allowed him to survive long enough for your help to arrive." Natalie bristled at the obvious slight.

"No matter. I leave him in your capable hands, Doctor. I know I can trust you to take good care of him." And with a smile he was gone.

Be Careful What You Wish For

by Lisa Clevenger

The smell of blood filled him like sweet ambrosia as he kissed her. He touched her, wanting to feel her against him, to feel the pleasure of tasting her as he ...

"No!" Nick gasped as he broke away from Natalie, his senses reeling from at the sudden absence of the scent. Blood. How he wanted to bite, to taste.

"Nick?" Nat glared up at him from her couch. "Nick, you promised." Her breasts glistened in the golden glow from lit candles placed around the room.

"I can't, Nat." He shrugged on his shirt and moved toward the door. "It's too much." He turned to look at his beloved Nat, a fierce tearing pain deep in him. "I can't do it." She was so beautiful.

Nat's dark eyes narrowed as he grabbed his coat. So angry. "You bastard." She surged to her feet, clutching her shirt to her otherwise bare chest. "You said you would."

"But I can't." He turned the knob of the front door.

"You mean won't."

"I have to go." He opened the door and fled the temptation of his need to taste her hot, rich life.

Nick stopped outside the elevator door of his loft. A familiar chill washed over him. Another vampire.

He flung open the elevator door, ready for anything, still hurt and aroused from his aborted lovemaking attempt with Natalie.

"Nicki, hello." A familiar husky voice greeted him.

"Angelique?" He stepped into the room, eyeing the Egyptian vampire. "What are you doing here?" The question came out harsher than he had intended

"I came to see what foolishness you have been up to." She smiled as she moved toward him.

"Where is LaCroix?"

"I did not come for Lucien." She trailed one hand across the back of his dining table chairs in a slow caress. "I came for you."

Angelique's smile sent a bold of pure hunger through him. He couldn't have Nat, but he could have Angelique. He and Angelique were old friends.

He reached for her, pulling her flush against him, one hand buried in her dark hair, the other wrapped around her slim waist.

She laughed, her gold eyes turning vampiric yellow-green. "Done pretending with your mortal friend?"

"You can give me what I want from her," he breathed as he inhaled her exotic scent. "Without harm to you."

"Yes," she hissed as she pulled his head to hers, pressing her lips to his.

He kissed her, his lips rough, searching and twining tongues. She ran the tip of her tongue across his lengthened fangs, eliciting a groan of pleasure from him as she buried her elegant fingers in his pale curls. He moved her toward the couch as he kissed her, and ran his hands up under her skirt to knead one smooth thigh before pulling her long legs up and around his waist. They tumbled in a tangled, heated heap onto the couch.

Angelique pulled at his shirt, pulling the fabric from him in a sharp tear.

"Oops," she breathed, raking her nails down his back.

He smiled and did the same to her blouse. "Now we're even." He brushed his mouth down her throat and flicked one nipple with his thumb. She arched under him, a hiss of pleasure escaping her.

"Touch me, Nicki, I want to feel your hands on me."

He responded by bending her over the arm of the couch and covering one of her upthrust breasts with his mouth.

The elevator door slid open. "Nick?" Nat's voice called.

"Don't stop, Nicki," Angelique rasped as his mouth left her breast.

Nat gasped as she caught sight of the couple on the couch.

"Go home, Nat," Nick growled as he looked down at the dark promise of Angelique's throat. He growled again and bit into the nape of Angelique's neck, his eyes still resting on Nat. Angelique's blood pulsed into his mouth in a heady rush, carrying the taste of her latest kill to him, through him, in a burst of pleasure.

Nat paled, then turned and fled the loft and the revelation of Nick's true needs.

Natalie sat sulking on a barstool at the Raven. The swirl of lights and pulse of the music was hollow comfort as she knocked back another glass of Canadian Mist.

"Hello, Dr. Lambert." She turned and looked at LaCroix as he sidled up beside her. "What brings you here?"

She signaled to the bartender for another drink. The man looked at LaCroix, who nodded, and filled her request.

"Nick." She took a long pull on the drink.

"Really?" One eyebrow arched up. "Do tell."

"He promised we would be together," she mumbled as she fished a cigarette out of her pocket.

"Together? As in biblically?" He could feel the rage that radiated off the tawny-haired woman. The first faint stirring of desire trickled through him.

"Yes." Nat patted her pockets for a lighter. LaCroix lit a match and offered it to her. She grasped his hand and touched the match to the cigarette. The tip glowed as she inhaled. "That liar." She turned and looked at LaCroix, pursed her full lips, and blew out a thin stream of smoke. "I found him with another woman in his loft. Not a half hour after he left me."

"Really. A mortal woman?" Excitement skittered across his nerves. Revenge was at hand.

"I don't know. She was black and quite beautiful. At least what I could see was beautiful."

Angelique. Anger flared bright and hot. Angelique was his. He turned to look at Natalie. Yes, revenge against both Nicholas and Angelique was at hand.

"I wish," she whispered, "I wish ... I could make him hurt as much as he hurt me."

The corner of LaCroix's mouth tilted in faint amusement. "I can grant you that wish, Doctor." He leaned and whispered into her ear. "I can show you what pleasures one such as I can give." He took her hand, removing the cigarette and crushing it into a nearby ashtray. "Ecstasy beyond imagining."

Nat looked up at him, considering. She slid off the barstool and followed him to the back of the club.

"Close your eyes, Natalie," he breathed, scooping her into his arms. She looked at him, frightened yet intrigued. He inhaled the heady aroma of fear, savoring the sharp scent.

"I don't know, maybe —" She wiggled, attempting to escape LaCroix.

"Natalie." This foolishness was over. He let her slide to the floor, then pinned her to the brick wall. "Too late, Natalie." He pressed his mouth against hers. She tasted like honey. He ignored her squirming, and coaxed her into accepting his kisses with skillful nips and brushes of his mouth.

Her full lips softened, and a low moan reverberated in her throat as her tongue crept out and touched his. She wrapped her arms around his neck and dueled with his tongue, tasting and teasing, her heat a contrast to his cold.

"LaCroix, I want you." She offered her neck to him, bending her head back, her slim, pale throat glowing in the dimness of the stairwell. "Bite me."

He laughed. "Oh, no, my dear Natalie." He ran one hand across the front of her soft neck. "It is not that easy. I want so much more than your blood." His hunger broke free. "I want your body. I want your soul."

Nat's head tilted forward, a soft smile playing on her sensuous lips. "Yes."

He scooped her up and took her to a room of silk and candles. A king-size bed dominated the small space. Black and crimson pooled together on the wrought-iron bed, black sheets and a red spread, both of silk. He laid her there, on the decadent sheets, and slipped the first few buttons free on her shirt. He brushed his hands across her lace-covered breasts, closing his eyes at the heat of her body, the pulse of her blood under his fingertips. His head lowered, his mouth tracing the curves of her upper breast, his tongue lingering on the faint tracing of veins.

She writhed underneath him, whimpering at his touch. He brushed a finger across the front fastening of her bra. Her breasts were freed with a flick of his finger, spilling out of the cups and into his waiting hands. "So beautiful."

"Touch me. Please." She arched toward him, her hard nipples offered to him like forbidden fruit on a platter.

He bent over his feast and took one puckered tip into his mouth. She gasped and clenched her fingers into the soft sheets beneath her. She smelled of lavender and rich, hot blood just under the surface of her pale skin. His fangs pressed out of his gums, lengthening in sharp increments with the increase of his bloodlust. One hand trailed down her stomach, stopping at the waistband of her skirt. He slid one hand across her generous hips and down the side of one thigh, sliding her wool skirt up and touching her nylon-clad leg.

"LaCroix," she breathed, wrapping one hand around his silk-clad bicep.

"Call me Lucien." He moved his mouth down her stomach with a series of slow teasing brushes of his fangs and lips against her fragrant flesh. So delightful, the smell of her. His tongue swirled around her bellybutton. Her stomach contracted under his mouth as she moaned again.

His kisses stopped at her waistband. He stood off the bed, taking Natalie's hand and standing her. He slid her blouse off her arms and turned her around. One hand unfastened her skirt as the other hand splayed across her stomach and pulled her flush to him. "Natalie," he breathed as he nipped at her slim neck. "Undress for me, Natalie." LaCroix slipped his hand under the waistband of her pantyhose, sliding the nylon down her hips, then stepping back for her to finish the process.

The heady scent of feminine arousal filled him in a heated rush. He stepped up behind her, pushing her thick curls to one side of her back. He bent her head to one side with one hand and the other hand trailed down her waist to curl into her silky pubic hair.

"Do you want to be mine, Natalie?" he asked as he licked her neck in a slow lascivious slide of the tip of his tongue. His hand slid through the lower curls crowning her sex, searching for her pleasure spot. "Forever?"

"Yes," she hissed as he found the nubbin of flesh and pressed, rubbing in a small circle.

He laughed. "Consent, freely given." He reared his head back and sank his fangs into the sweet skin of her throat.

Blood, sweet as honey and milk, filled his mouth, a voluptuous crimson river. He tasted her pleasure, reveled in it as he filled himself in a white-hot burst of passion. He tasted of her life, of her thoughts, of her needs. They mingled, her heart pulling him along, beating in time, together, in one deep throb of scarlet ecstasy.

Her heart slowed and he pulled out of her neck in a deep gasp. He laid her on the bed and arranged her like a porcelain doll. "So beautiful." He touched a tawny curl. He then used the edge of a letter opener on his bedside table to slit his wrist.

"Drink, my child, and be one with me." He put his wrist to her mouth. Her lips twitched, then she latched onto his blood, drinking deeply.

"Nat?" Nicholas' voice echoed from the bottom of the stairs. "Nat!" Nick came flying through the door of LaCroix's bedroom, to the sight of Natalie drinking from LaCroix's wrist with greedy gulps. She looked up, her eyes green-gold, as the door splintered, a crimson stain around her mouth.

"No." Nick fell to his knees. "No."

LaCroix chuckled. "Welcome to the family, Natalie."

Perspective
by Jacqueline Taero

Practice has not yet made perfect, I see,
The technique *is* a delicate one.
We each have our talents, and as for yours ...
You're quite the lady-killer, my son.

Alter Idem
(Another Self)
by Cyndi Bayless Overstreet

Tiny and infinitely precious.

He took her into his arms. She folded gently against him, rested her head against the broad expanse of his chest and sighed. "Was it truly so great a thing to ask as all that, father?"

"*Never*," the word hissed from his lips, "call me that again. Call me what you will; son, lover, *slave*, if you must, but I am not your father. Lucius died, here, tonight, among the dust and ash of ancient tombs; atop this sarcophagus where you so callously entombed the creature who spawned you."

Her laughter rippled though the chamber, a child's laughter, tinkling with a chilling innocence among the dusky shadows, lost in the darkness beyond the painted walls displaying with solemn pageantry the passage of the Ka down the river Styx toward the judgment of after-life and beyond ...

"How melodramatic you've become, father."

He cut her with an icy stare.

"Oh, very well, have it your way," she huffed with exasperation. "Perhaps *General* is more in keeping with your current turn of piety."

"Even that is greater honor than I deserve." He turned away from the girl reclined in his arms where they lay atop the sarcophagus, and stared into the distant shadows. "What have I become?"

"The greatest of all things — *my creation*."

"The embodiment of eternal evil."

Her sigh cut the darkness. "Such droll sentiments. This, from the man who slew a thousand Gauls. Tell me, Lucius, did you believe yourself to be evil when you raped their woman? Did their cries of pain and anguish

prick this conscience of yours when you thrust yourself into their unwilling bodies as they writhed on the ground?"

"War and its inevitable consequences are mortal necessities."

"And we, of course, are no longer mortal. Or have you forgotten? We are free, free to be, to do, all things. None dare judge nor stand against us. If war is a necessary evil, how can you deny our love? Can you gaze into my eyes and sincerely claim you did not relish what just transpired between us?"

He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut.

"You, who in the prime of your manhood experienced all that life had to offer before succumbing to my eternal embrace; how dare you seek to deny me the ecstasy that is rightfully mine to know? You owe me this — and more! I have never known such rapture, even in the throes of pure blood-lust, as what I experienced here, tonight, crushed beneath you atop this stone —"

"Silence!"

The walls of the burial chamber reverberated with his rage. Mortar crumbled and a scattering of dust rose in the air.

"Must you speak of it?" he rasped.

Divia's laughter rippled over his senses, laying bare the raw edges of what remained of his soul.

"My beloved." Her tiny hand sought the cool alabaster of his cheek. She turned his head, forced him to face her.

Truth taunted from the seeming innocence of her childlike eyes. The truth of what he'd done.

"Again," she breathed.

The word pierced a stake through his chest and his breath caught.

"Do it ... again."

Rage consumed him; it rose in a roar of anguish that ripped from his lips. "Surely this is madness! Tell me that I died in the rubble of Pompeii and this is my hell." He dropped his face into his hands.

"Why do you fight me, so?" Her fingers traced patterns over the firm muscles of his arm. Her lips brushed his cheek. "Would you deny the ecstasy embodied by my embrace? Our blood cries to intertwine. Swear to me that it does not beckon to you, this blood of your master encased in ageless flesh. Our thoughts are one, or have you forgotten? Do you foolishly believe I did not feel the passion surging through you? Your lust for me as you claimed my supple young body? Why do you turn away?"

"May the gods have mercy upon us for what we've done."

"The gods! How long has it been since I heard you acknowledge the existence of fictitious deities? Even in life you sought only to defy, never to beseech them. Why start now?"

"You're my *daughter*!"

"Lucius is dead or so you said. He lies within this tomb, eternally enshrined with the ashes of my master, the one who foolishly sought to harness an evil greater than himself. Indeed, Lucius lies dead and buried, perhaps beneath the very ash of Pompeii itself." She grabbed his chin with a grip of insurmountable strength and forced him to look into her face. "So be it; as your master I order you, General. Make love to me again."

Rage and shame strangled his chest; it fought to force free in a torrent of anguish that glared from his eyes. "I should have lived to see the day you were given in *iustum matrimonium* to the man of your choice; one worthy of your virtues."

"I choose ... you, my *triumphator*." She chuckled deep within her throat. "If it will ease your sentiments, I shall don the *flammeum*, pay homage to Juno, and permit you to loosen my girdle with all due pomp-and-circumstance in the presence of witnesses, no less "

"There is nothing amusing about this unholy union, you despicable, wicked child! To lie with your own father is an abomination against nature."

"Shall we gather daisies to plait into my hair and cast aside my girlhood *toga praetexta*. Dedicate it to the gods!"

"Stop it!"

"Do you think me a total innocent?" she hissed, her tiny face a pale oval, sublime and beguiling in the dim. "Don't you realize, even in life I felt such passion that only you could suffice to fulfill it. We are alike, you and I, as only kindred souls can be. *Alter idem*."

"Another self," he whispered as the truth of her words twisted his heart. "*Tamquam alter idem*."

"I watched from the shadows as you laid with my mother; weak, sniveling creature that she was, totally unworthy of the gift I chose to bestowed upon you. The bed chambers could hardly be considered private, now could they?" The girl leaned near, her breath a whisper of blood-scent, caressed his cheek. "Your pale, strong limbs; firelight flickered over your form as you writhed and strained against her in the darkness —"

"Evil incarnate. I am as much to blame for the monster you've become as the creature who magnified that evil only to be consumed by it. I should have destroyed you when I held the scythe in my hand."

"But you did not." A smile taunted from her lips. "Father."

"I ... did not." His words echoed and faded into the silence that fell between them.

A whisper of light caught the golden halo of her hair. Innocent eyes, crystal blue, a child's eyes, studied him in silence; the wisdom of ages lingered in their depths. She squirmed onto his lap and settled near, arms around his neck; so like the child he'd known and loved in life; a chilling silhouette, accentuating the depravity of what they'd become. "Why?" she breathed against his ear.

Her question seized his heart, twisted the vestiges of humanity and his response froze in his throat.

"Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance?" She melted into his chest and searched his face with knowing eyes.

"Truly I am damned." He crushed her near, enfolded her in the sanctuary of his arms, and pressed his lips to the coolness of her brow. "Eternal companion."

Eternal tormentor.

"Child of my heart's desire." His words quenched the embers of mortality that smoldered, faded ...

... and died.

A tinkling of laughter, child's laughter, danced through the chamber of death. Hollow and empty it echoed beyond the tombs where they lay entwined, into the darkness that rose to claim it ...



"Divia!"

The cry wrenched from his lips and LaCroix bolted awake in the stillness of his room.

Silence taunted him from the darkness.

He drew a ragged breath and dropped his face into his hands. Dampness coated his palms and he pulled back, stared at the crimson sweat soaking his hands. Scarlet plastered his nightshirt to his chest.

"Wretched creature," he spat in defiance. "What right have you to haunt me?"

Damno! Eternal damnation is far more fitting a price to pay, wouldn't you agree, Father? Should I not haunt your dreams — eternally?

"LaCroix?"

The voice drew his attention and he turned and faced the silhouette framed in the doorway. Candlelight backlit the familiar lines of the man's face, the golden hair, clear blue eyes deepened by concern. Nicholas.

"Are you all right?" He stepped into the room.

"Always." LaCroix sat up straight and faced his visitor. "What makes you believe otherwise?"

Nick opened his mouth to respond, met the stoic gaze that dared him to comment, then reconsidered and said nothing.

"To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your presence?" The silken tone betrayed nothing of the turmoil within.

His visitor stood for a moment in silence as if struggling for a response, then he shrugged and held out a glass; its amber liquid caught the light and beckoned to LaCroix, tempting his thirst.

Nicholas crossed the room and relinquished it into his hand.

He gulped the refreshing contents then stalled in surprise. The vintage was human! The finest. Part of his own stock to be sure, but it was the deliverer of this culinary delight that produced the master vampire's astonishment. He thought to make mention of his wayward protégé's lapse of mortal refinement, then decided against it. "Is there something that I can assist you with, Nicholas?" He slowly sipped his repast with an air of indifference. "I was led to believe that your astute associates were content to consider the events of the last few days settled, or am I to be subjected to further incarceration?"

"I didn't come here on department business."

"Really?" He studied the detective with an unwavering gaze and waited as the minutes stretched between them.

Nick was the first to look away. His eyes roamed over the contents of the room, the massive four-poster bed, a velvet Victorian lounge, a Queen Anne chair, an imposing oak bureau of unknown origins, and dateless objets d'art. All in all, an appropriate collage-of-the-ages to adorn the domicile of an ageless entity.

"I trust there's a reason for your visit?" LaCroix's voice smoothly wove into the silence of the moment.

"Yes ... well." Nicholas turned and faced his steady gaze. "I was just passing by and I thought that ..."

"Yes?"

"I thought that, perhaps, you might enjoy a little company."

The master vampire arched a sculpted brow. "Your concern is appreciated, Nicholas, but as you can see, I'm quite all right." He spread his hands with nonchalance. "Clearly, there are no bogeymen lurking about." He drew a sigh and whispered, "Nor little girls seeking a collection of heads as one might expect a child to collect dolls."

Nicholas cringed but said nothing.

"So if you'll excuse me, I'll return to the oblivion of sleep; Morpheus awaits." He rested his glass on the night stand and resumed an air of relaxed refinement while delivering the younger vampire a pointed stare. "*Au revoir.*"

The detective cleared his throat and retreated a step from the bed. "Sorry to have disturbed your sleep." His eyes fell to the blood-sweat despoiling the sheets, but he refrained from commenting. "I'll be going. I just stopped by to remind you —" he paused, returned to the bed and surprised them both by resting his hand on the Master's arm. "I'm here if you need me."

"So you've said." LaCroix's expressionless eyes fell to the hand, then rose and locked the younger vampire in a steady gaze.

The minutes stretched between them, until, uneasy beneath the unwavering stare, Nicholas dropped his hand. With a stiff nod, he retreated for the door.

"I should have done as Divia asked."

Nicholas froze in the doorway, the confession a tangible presence between them, and slowly turned to face him. "That's pure insanity and you know it."

"Do I?"

The air rushed from his lungs and he gasped. "Without doubt. How could you possibly believe otherwise?"

"Was it truly so great a thing to ask?" His voice fell to a whisper. "What irony; I, the creature whose atrocities against humanity are without precedent, recoil at so simple a request."

Let us do what must not be done.

The flicker of a lash betrayed the wince that marred the powerful vampire's poise, and he turned away.

"You could not have conceded to her demands and retained even a vestige of your humanity."

"*Humanity*," he roared. "What have such sentiments to do with me?"

"Everything." Nicholas returned to his side and sat on the edge of the bed. He rested his heel on the frame and laced his fingers across his up-drawn knee. "No one could fault your refusal."

"I very much doubt whether Vachon and Urs would consent to grant such leniency in my regard." He chuckled deeply in his throat. "*Terra es, terram ibis.*"

"True, neither wanted to die. I suppose it can be said that all vampires are cowards at heart." Nicholas focused on the shadows in the corners of

the room and sighed. "Cheating death is our specialty. Still, if they knew the facts, even they would agree you had no choice."

"Choice is a subjective issue given to much debate, would you not agree?" He drew the air deeply into his lungs and released it slowly. "If we had lived mortal lives, I would have given her in marriage. As ludicrous as it seems in this modern age, her mother and I would have paid homage to the gods, and in the presence of a priest of Jupiter, offered up the dress of her girlhood, draped her in a veil of red, and presented her hand to her betrothed. Instead, she sought the only love she'd ever known — her father's. I suppose, given the circumstances it was logical, even if reprehensible. What good could be said of a child who seduces her own father?"

"You could not *consent*."

"And so, I lose my lovely daughter not once ... but twice."

Silence fell between them, broken only by the distant sounds of Toronto's stirrings. Dawn beckoned to its human inhabitants. Hinting beyond the far horizon, it drew them to the birth of a new day while signaling its demise to those who sought the night.

"The evil she possessed was no greater than my own." The words were a silken whisper floating though the room. "Spawned as much by myself as the creature she destroyed; your great-grandfather, one might say."

"By her own admittance, Divia chose her own destiny," Nicholas protested. He turned and met the ice-blue eyes of the one who granted him eternal life. "No one is to blame."

"She would choose her own way," he repeated softly. "Not unlike another of my offspring."

"As we all must."

"Birds from the nest." His gaze passed over the fair countenance; expressive blue eyes, golden hair. Struck by an eerie sense of *déjà vu*, he was surprised to realize the similarity to his daughter had escaped his observation over the years. "As she was my flesh, you are my blood"

Beyond the moment, dawn threatened. It whispered its warning along their senses, uniting them in a common bond unique to their kind, an instinctive foreboding of the hours to come ...

"You were not alike." Nicholas dispersed the hush; conviction hardened his tone.

"It is said, we spend our lives searching for another self." LaCroix's voice rose in a melodic whisper that filled the room. "*Alter idem*." He leaned near, rested his palm against Nicholas' chest and felt for the stirrings

of a heart he'd silenced centuries before. "If you linger, the sun will trap you here."

Nicholas' eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected intimacy of the gesture, then he astonished himself by reclining back and settling against the broad expanse of the master vampire's chest; no heartbeat echoed from its depths. "I know."

The Beating Of Her Wings

by Sandy Adams

"Hello. I haven't seen you in a long time."

Nick looked around, surprised at being addressed in such a familiar manner by an unfamiliar voice. "I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else."

He favored her with a disarming grin, mostly to cover his own confusion. There was a woman - little more than a girl, really - perched on the hood of his Cadillac, and she had somehow gotten there in the split second his back had been turned. All without his sensing her.

She shook her head, a knowing smile tweaking her lips and lighting eyes that were black as night, and nearly as ancient. She wore her eyeliner Egyptian style: heavy black lines of kohl encircling her lids. On the left, the thick line swirled down onto her pale cheek to form an abstract spiral. Her hair was raven's wing dark and styled into Gothic spikes that formed a ragged veil over one eye. Black lipstick stood out starkly against a mime's white face - a complexion rarely achieved even by vampires, after a millennia of avoiding the sun. Completing the look, she was dressed entirely in black, right down to the athletic shoes on her feet. Goth-by-Reebok.

Following his bemused gaze, she laughed. "Hey, I'm a busy person. Comfort counts."

"Who are you?" he asked, still staring. Despite her ultra-pale skin and somber trappings, he was almost certain she wasn't one of his kind.

Her lips curved in a gamin smile, that seemed to be a natural inclination. "I'm not surprised you don't remember me," she said, toying with the silver chain around her neck. An ankh dangled from the chain, resting between small breasts. "Most people don't. Then again, most people rarely meet me more than once."

Seeing his mystification, she added cheerfully, "I'm Death."

"Right," Nick said flatly. Just what he needed after a full shift - and with the sun edging up over the horizon. A crazy perched on the hood of his car. Wasn't his partner punishment enough?

He eyed her petite frame sarcastically. "Death. As in the Grim Reaper. The Dark Angel. The sister of Dream ..."

"You do remember me!"

Nick frowned, tired and wondering why he was having this conversation. It was like one of Schanke's discourses on the merits of garlic:

annoying and a real waste of time. "Isn't Death supposed to be a tall skeleton carrying a scythe?"

"Aren't vampires supposed to walk around in opera capes, talking like Bela Lugosi?" she countered, without missing a beat. She dangled a foot over the fender and contemplated the toe of her Reeboks while he hunted for his voice.

Finding it, he took a deep breath. "Look, Miss -"

"Death," she interjected brightly.

"Whatever! I really don't have time for whatever game you're playing, so if you'll kindly remove yourself from my car -?"

Her dark eyes lifted to meet his, skewering them with a naked honesty it was impossible to look away from. "Even your kind come to me eventually, Nick."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on," she chided, pursing her black-tinted lips. "Like I'm going to tell anybody! Besides, you haven't killed for blood in, what - like a century now, right?"

Frightened (and angry because of it), he snapped, "Who put you up to this? LaCroix?"

She met his anger with a seemingly imperturbable calm. "I don't take orders from children, Nick."

Any other time, hearing LaCroix referred to as a 'child' would have reduced Nick to helpless laughter. At the moment, he was too confused and upset to enjoy it. It didn't exactly help when she shrugged and added, in the same reasonable tone, "I'm the eldest of the Endless, you see. You know the expression 'older than Time'? That's me."

Maybe it was simply easier to surrender to the unreality of the situation. Maybe it was fatigue or the nearness of the dawn. Maybe her madness was contagious. Whatever the reason, he found himself saying, "You certainly don't look your age."

"Neither do you." A coquettish grin. "Not bad for nearly eight hundred years ..."

"You're not a vampire," he said with sudden certainty. "So how do you know so much about me?"

"Oh, I was there."

He frowned, not understanding, and she explained, "The night you nearly died." She held up a hand as if to forestall any protest he might mount. "Vampires aren't really dead, no matter what the legends say. I should know

"But you came pretty close ... I was there, waiting for you."

Her head tilted, spilling dark hair over one shoulder, and her black eyes sparkled. "I still am."

"I am immortal," he said, though it had the sound of resignation rather than defiance. "Damned to live forever."

"Nick ..." She shook her head, sadly. "Nothing lives forever. One day, even the universe will end. And I'll be here, the last one out - turning off the lights and shutting the door behind me."

Her gamin features shadowed for just a second, and she added softly, "Even Dreams die."

"Why are you here?" he asked, suddenly. Even as he said the words, he realized he'd finally given in. He believed her. Which probably made her the sane one.

One moon-pale shoulder lifted in a coy shrug. "Maybe I'm just curious about what could make a vampire change his ways." Her gaze seemed to penetrate to the depths of his soul - if he still had one. "Maybe I was just curious about you."

"I got tired of the killing," he said stiffly. "I wanted to live, again."

"To live?" She mocked him with his own words. "Aren't you immortal? Life eternal and all that jazz?"

"What I do isn't living. I want to be mortal again."

"Careful what you wish for, Nick." She cocked one dark brow. "You really have no idea of the high cost of living."

Stung, he sneered, "And you do?"

"More than you might think."

She hopped down from her perch on the hood, and Nick was faintly astonished to find that she barely topped his shoulder. Reading the surprise in his expression, she quipped, "Big things come in little packages."

Then she sobered, her head lifting as if she had heard a distinct summons. "Well, it's been real. But I've got an appointment and I can't be late."

Suddenly it seemed very important that he know who her 'appointment' was with - urgently, he demanded, "Who have you come for?"

There was infinite compassion in her dark eyes. "Everyone meets me sooner or later, Nick. I'm really not that bad, once you get to know me."

"Who, damn it!"

She merely looked at him, her silence more eloquent than words, and he read the answer in her eyes.

"NO!" The denial was torn from his throat. "You can't -"

But he was pleading with thin air. Death had vanished between one heartbeat and the next.

He took instantly to the air, fighting the terror rising in him with each passing second. Natalie. She had come for Natalie. He knew it, even as he knew there was nothing he could do to prevent it. And he knew that he had to try, even if it meant his own end.

He reached her building in time to hear the scream.

Without hesitation, he flung himself through the apartment window in a dazzling shower of glass and wood, oblivious to the thousands of tiny cuts hatching his skin. He landed heavily, and rolled to his feet.

Natalie sprawled across the bed, the duvet already dyed scarlet by the spreading stain beneath her. Her assailant bent over her, bowie knife poised for the killing stroke.

Snarling, Nick lunged, clearing the bed in one powerful leap, knocking the younger man to the floor. One-handed, Nick lifted him - all one hundred eighty pounds of him - and whirled, smashing the man into the wall with enough force to bring a rain of plaster down on them both. Fangs bared, eyes blazing feral yellow, he was a vision from Hell leering into the killer's face.

The man tried to scream, but Nick's fingers closed about his throat, robbing him of air. He kicked desperately, even managed to connect once or twice with Nick's legs, but to no effect. He might as well have tried to kick down a mountain.

Nick could hear the man's heartbeat, a thunder in his ears. The coppery stench of blood was all around him, driving the vampire in him wild. It would be so easy to tear out the soft throat before him - and didn't the man deserve it? Didn't he deserve to die?

His fangs were inches from the man's sweating flesh when he realized he could hear a second heartbeat in the room. He jerked his head around. "Nat?"

Hope flaring to life within him, Nick flung the man from him and ran back to the bed. He knelt beside the prone woman, listening. Yes ... There was a pulse, faint and far too rapid, but there. She was still alive!

Behind him, he heard a muttered curse - and looked up just in time to see Nat's attacker leap at him. From somewhere, he had recovered the knife.

Nick blocked the attack with an out-thrust arm, sweeping the man from his feet and throwing him back into the wall. There was a sickening crunch - a sound like green wood snapping - and the man slid to the floor. A red

smear marked his slide down the wall; somehow, he'd managed to impale himself on his own knife.

Now, there was only one heart beating in the room, and it was slowing.

"Hadn't you better call an ambulance?" asked a soft voice, just beyond his shoulder.

Nick jumped. Not even vampires were that quiet!

He turned to face Death, fangs bared. "You can't have her! Not yet."

The pale woman shook her head in quiet wonder. "You'd really fight me for her, wouldn't you?" She sighed. "Not that it would do any good. But -"

Moving away from the bed, she approached the body slumped in the corner. "As it happens, I'm not here for her - or you. This time."

She extended her hand and ... something ... reached up from the corpse to take it. The faint outline of a man looked down at its mortal shell with the boundless astonishment of the new-dead. Gently, she took his hand and led him away.

On the point of vanishing into the undiscovered country that was her realm, she glanced back at Nick, hovering protectively before the still form on the bed. "I'll be seeing you."

Then she was gone.

Nick scrambled for the phone, with no time to consider her parting words or what they might mean for him. He only had one thought, and that was for Natalie's safety.

But, after he'd dialed the emergency number and sat listening to the welcome sound of approaching sirens, he thought he heard - in the distance, but as near as the fragile pulsing of the human heart - the beating of great dark wings.

The characters of Dream and Death are the creations of Neil Gaiman and appear in the DC Comics/Vertigo title Sandman.

Virtual Immortality

by Winifred McBeth

"Father," Nightcrawler looked up from the closing ritual that he followed after every broadcast to see his errant son standing nervously before him. His knight errant son, to be more precise.

"Nicholas," his voice held the customary amount of amused derision that he used with this second oldest of his surviving children.

"Father," Nicholas repeated. "I've come back to you."

LaCroix held very still. "Of course you have. What is it you want now?" He turned his back to Nicholas and resumed tidying up the studio.

"I want to hunt with you again, father. I want to taste the kill. I want to be a proper child of LaCroix again." The words rushed eagerly out of him.

The master vampire looked intently at his protégé. "Nicholas, are you feeling well?" He smiled knowingly. "Ah! The mortal world has disappointed you again: some idol fallen, some innocence stained, some ancient cup broken." He turned away again to complete the end of the Nightcrawler's radio duties. "Should I feel flattered or insulted that you come to me last of all?"

"Father," Nicholas continued persuasively, "I know I've been ... rebellious, but this time I've returned for good."

"Oh, you were always on the side of Good, Nicholas, that's why I sent Janette after you to begin with," LaCroix retorted sarcastically.

"How can I convince you?" Nicholas persisted.

The master raised an arch eyebrow. "Kill something?"

"Yes." The young vampire nodded eagerly.

"Your Natalie, perhaps?" The master tested this new loyalty.

His child smiled. "If you wish." He turned toward the studio doorway with a gesture of command. Natalie walked into the studio with the slow steps of a mortal under vampiric control.

"You hold her mind completely?" the master prompted.

"Completely," Nicholas assured him.

"This could be interesting," his master conceded with a smile.

The bottle clicked into place at the input port, forming a smooth line with the lid of the coffin-shaped device. Nicholas laid a hand on the lid like a mourner at a graveside.

"We had no other choice," Natalie reminded him. "LaCroix never would have let you regain your humanity. He kept you from seeing the simple answer."

Nicholas nodded slowly. "I know. Still, it seems unfair to trap him like this."

"He has the computer realities to keep him occupied. Tormenting you is no longer his only amusement." Natalie smiled. "Think of it as a bite for a bite."

Nicholas grimaced. "I suppose." He examined the readout. "What program is running now?"

With a puzzled frown, Natalie read the text aloud. "'Dark Phoenix'?"

Triptych

by Shelia Turner

*"There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and
the bridge is love..."*

Thornton Wilder, The Bridge Of San Luis Rey

The Gift

Nick was disagreeing with Natalie about some, as he would put it, 'stupid TV show'. He could tell she was getting aggravated, very aggravated, with him. As he pushed open her office door, he gave himself a self-satisfied little smirk, so he didn't see her stop. Nat had stopped so fast that he bumped into her from behind. He looked over her shoulder as she moved towards her desk.

"Oh, Nick! You shouldn't ha ..."

Nick felt an unaccustomed pang of jealousy and was startled for a moment. He hadn't felt that particular emotion in a long time.

"Nick, you didn't!" Natalie's excited voice now had a questioning air. He quickly tried for a neutral expression, but she was too fast and caught it.

"Well ..." she said, looking at the abundant foliage. There was a card. "AH-HA!" she exclaimed, glancing at Nick under lowered lids. He looked slightly uncomfortable, if not a little peeved. That thought actually brought a thrill of satisfaction which was quickly replaced with a burning curiosity.

The card was small and only had 'Dr. Natalie Lambert, Coroner's Office' written in elegant script. She frowned in puzzlement.

"Who?" Nick reached for the card. Nat snatched her hand back, and gave him a killer look of 'do you mind?'. He was taken aback, if not a little hurt.

He is jealous, she thought.

"I'll never tell," she smiled evilly up at him. Then she relented at his boyish look of dismay. *Damn him, she thought. He's doing that on purpose.* She handed him the card with a shrug. "I don't know."

"Looks like you have a secret admirer," Nick offered. They both studied the bouquet. It was huge, with all the exotic flowers she could think of, and a few she couldn't.

"These look like they cost a small fortune."

"Well," Nick asked, "have you done a good deed lately?"

"Nothing to warrant this," she replied.

With an annoyed tinge to his voice, Nick said, "It seems someone wanted to thank you for something."

Natalie couldn't keep the smile out of her voice, so she tried for her blankest expression. "Nick, are you jealous?"

"Of course not!" He straightened up slightly and glanced at the door. "I'm late, gotta run. I'll talk to you later." With that he turned and almost flew out the door.

Nat held her laughter as long as she could, and when the door finally closed behind him, she laid her head on her arms and laughed until tears came to her eyes.



All through the night she would glance at the flowers. Their perfume, heady and almost intoxicating, filled the small room. Natalie looked up from her paperwork when she heard her door open.

Expecting Nick, Nat was surprised to see a messenger with a small package. "Yes?" she arched her brows curiously.

"Dr. Lambert?" the man questioned, and at her nod, he continued, "sign here, please." She signed her name and he left the box on her desk. She looked at it carefully. It was about ten inches by two inches and beautifully wrapped in marbled black paper inlaid with silver and purple. Slowly she opened it and gasped, hand to her mouth. Inside lay the most exquisite bracelet she ever saw.

It was silver and encrusted with sapphires and diamonds as large as her fingernail. *Whoa!* she thought, *this looks like something for a princess ...* She couldn't even begin to think of how much something like this would cost, and it looked very old.

Natalie looked at the box. On a thin parchment there was only one line written in copperplate: 'A token of my gratitude.' She was torn between admiration and girlish glee at such an unexpected gift.

This had to be Nick. She didn't even remotely know of anyone else who could afford this. Her door opened again.

This time it was Nick. She dangled the bracelet in front of him. "Nick, you really shouldn't have ..."

He looked puzzled and took hold of the jewelry. He narrowed his eyes and studied it carefully. With a dark look he handed it back to her. "Natalie, I didn't."

Nat looked at him, a frown creasing her forehead. "If you didn't, then who did?" She was very puzzled now.

With an air of dismissal, Nick turned and found her coat. He held it out to her. "Ready?" he asked.

"Could you ...?" she gestured to the bouquet.

"Sure," he replied.

They made their way to the Caddy.

The ride to Natalie's apartment was silent, with Nick moody and Nat self-satisfied. They both were curious.

She unlocked her door and stood back, mouth open. She was amazed at, for the lack of a better word ... stuff. Her apartment was crammed with stuff. It took her a moment to realize that her apartment had been locked. "Then how could ...?"

Nick shouldered past her. "Stay here," he commanded. As he glanced around he drew his gun. He disappeared into her apartment.

Sidney, she thought. She whispered, "Sidney ... Sidney?" The cat looked at her sleepily from amidst boxes piled high on the couch. He hopped off and, mewing hungrily, began rubbing against her ankles.

"Nat," Nick's voice called from her bedroom. She walked carefully, trying not to trip over what looked like a Renoir. She stopped in her doorway. Her room looked like something out of a gothic romance novel. Candles everywhere, flowers on every available surface, and her bed ... she sat down on the edge ... her bed was covered in rose petals. Those rare blue rose petals everyone called black.

"Nick, what's going on?" Natalie picked up some of the petals. They were so soft.

Nick spied a paper on her pillow. It was rolled and tied with a black velvet ribbon. "May I?" and before she could answer, he drew off the ribbon. Nat moved to his side, and they both began to read.

"Natalie, my beloved ... it's to you that I owe my continued existence ... and pleasure."

"This is getting scary," she said.

Nick gently put his hand on the side of her neck. "You're safe with me." His hand trailed down to her collar. "Maybe these other 'gifts' hold a clue."

It soon became obvious that these so-called 'gifts' weren't all from the same person. Some bore notes, others just the present itself. There were flowers of every variety and hue, small trinkets, candy. Nat couldn't believe her eyes. Rings, bracelets, loose gems, even a tiara encrusted with pearls, diamonds and emeralds. There was what appeared to be a Rembrandt oil

leaning against her refrigerator door. Small statues, a Ming vase, crystal. She threw up her hands.

"I feel like I'm in the middle of 'Natalie-wins-big-in-the-*Twilight-Zone*'."

"Nat, come home with me," Nick said. "You're not safe here. I believe ..." He paused. "I believe this is the work of my kind." She looked at him curiously.

He smiled tenderly, his hand on her cheek. "Think, Natalie ... we were dying ... as a race, we were dying, and you didn't care ... didn't care that we weren't 'human'. You saved us anyway." He closed his eyes, and when he opened them they were that vibrant green/gold. She gasped and tried to step back, but he held her firmly.

"Some of my kindred might not stop with material goods."

"You mean ...?"

"Yes. One may want to reward you with this curse."

She looked at him questioningly. "But if they are happy, they wouldn't hurt me ..." Her voice trailed off.

"Some would, a mortal knowing our secret." He held her close and thought to himself and ... others ... who would hear, *This woman is mine. She is for no one else.* He could sense a faint amusement. Nick reached down and gathered up Sidney. "Come, get a few things. You're staying with me."

His tone brooked no argument.



At Nick's place it was obvious that someone, somehow, had gotten past Nick's security system without setting off the alarm, but he felt no presence. There was a fire burning in the fireplace, crystal laid out, a bottle chilling in a bucket of ice. His numerous candles were lit. There was a note in each delicate crystal flute, one to Nick and one to Natalie. Natalie's read, 'Natalie ... mon amour ... I do not feel that I owe you anything ... but in the spirit of things I will grant you your darkest desire ... if not mine.' It was signed 'LaCroix' with a flourish.

She looked at Nick, puzzled. He was intently reading his note. He crumpled it in his hand and looked at her strangely, that greenish/gold gleam in his eyes. Quickly he turned, trying to cover for the beast. He looked embarrassed. She touched his sleeve and he turned back, the beast still not tamed.

"Nick?" she questioned. He mutely offered the paper and she read, 'The secret to loving a mortal woman, Nicholas, is you just don't kill them, if you can ...'

As Nick drew her to him, to cover her mouth with his own, Natalie could have sworn she could hear a faint laughter ... then everything but Nick was banished from her mind.

"... there is a balance between two worlds ..."

Seven Mary Three

The End

Nicholas paused, silent and still, as only his kind — predators — could do. He studied her with his heightened senses. With only faint illumination from a nightlight in the hall, he could see her perfectly, her auburn hair only a little bit darker, her lashes feathering against her cheek, her lips full and slightly parted, inviting. His gaze traveled over her prone form, memorizing it for the future. Natalie, the mortal woman, his mortal woman, he'd never find another like her, not in another eight hundred years. He would miss her, and long for her, night after night, that exquisite agony called yearning. He could smell her, that intoxicating elixir that taunted and pleaded with him nightly, to take, to drink, to possess as only he could.

Unconsciously Natalie had detected his presence. She moaned softly in her sleep, moving to bare her neck for him, slightly parting her thighs. Nicholas took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of her arousal, and he smiled, a smile chilly and with unholy hunger. As he felt the beast rise in him, his fangs descended and his body hummed in anticipation. He held the beast in check, savoring the wanting, the need, and remembered ...

❧❧❧

Natalie had come to him, excitement barely restrained in those beautiful blue eyes ... she had discovered a breakthrough ... she had finally, after all these years, figured it out. In that moment he realized how much he loved Natalie, loved her with all of his never-ending life. He had searched so long, denied himself so long. Natalie had found an end to his continued existence. She had promised him an end to forever.

❧❧❧

Natalie was stirring, awakening at the hypnotic call of the beast. He sat down beside her, feeling her hair, the warm softness of her cheek, the swell of her breast. He took her in his arms, waiting for her eyes to open, for comprehension to finally dawn in them. Then the exquisite agony of his

fangs sinking deeply into her neck. He stood, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, watching her now lifeless form. Yet he loved her, loved her in dark ways she never understood. Tenderly he kissed her cold, still lips. All the warmth was gone, feeding him, sustaining him, for all of eternity. Natalie, his love, his mortal woman, was gone.



Nicholas stood atop a building a few blocks from his warehouse, watching the flames, listening to the sirens. The heat caressed him, calling him from his vantage point. Nick Knight was gone, burning in cleansing fire. He turned at the presence of his master.

"Ah, Nicholas ... I'm so glad you tired of this little life of yours."

Nicholas smiled at LaCroix, his father, his brother. "Did you really ever doubt me?"

LaCroix said nothing, merely smiled and laid his arm across Nicholas' shoulders, and they both turned to watch the flames. The fire was enormous, and it would take days to put out all the flames. Days to find the two bodies. And the humans would mourn, mourn poor Nick Knight, the police detective, and Natalie Lambert, the good doctor who loved him. They would bemoan the cosmic unfairness of it all, but would take a tiny comfort in that they had died in each other's arms.

"I'm hungry."

Nick turned and saw his lover, his sister, his daughter. The beast was raging in her eyes and her fangs were wickedly sharp. She was so hungry.

LaCroix stepped between them and took Natalie's hand, raising it to his lips. "Yes, ma petite ... I know ... you're hungry." To Nicholas he turned and also took up his hand and, with one last look at the flames, they flew.

Walk In My Shoes

Nick flew. The sky above Toronto was cool and moonless, the stars sparkling coldly. He loved flying; to him the only redeeming virtue of being a vampire was flying. On that thought, he landed on the roof of his warehouse. He paused, listening. Natalie was in the kitchen, probably mixing some vile protein drink for him. Nick grimaced at the thought of drinking it.

I'd rather enjoy Natalie, he thought, as a wicked smile played on his lips and his eyes turned a molten green-gold. Nick let the hunger grow, feeding on the wanting. If Natalie only knew how he hungered for her night after night, the siren song of her blood calling him, begging him, to take, to devour, to own. The beast was urging him on, and he took a half

step towards the door, only stopping himself with a great force of will. Mentally he chided himself. This was a dangerous game, and it wasn't fair to Natalie. One night the beast might win. He cared for Natalie, more than he even wanted to admit to himself.

Take her, the beast whispered seductively. Nick closed his eyes and steeled himself as a wave of longing washed over him.

Own her, the beast tempted. *She wants it — why do you deny yourself?* Nick threw back his head and roared his frustration at the sky. Yes, this was a dangerous game he played with himself, but sometimes just feeling the wanting was too hard to resist.

Damn, he thought as he heard Natalie calling him. He sensed her moving to the roof door.

Stay, the beast demanded. *She's already yours.*

Nick held himself as still as possible, listening to Nat come up the stairs. She was calling his name. He clenched his hands, nails digging into his palms, bringing crescents of blood. He moaned, smelling his blood, wanting hers. He growled softly as Nat opened the door and unhesitatingly started towards him.

"Nick? Are you all right?" He could feel her concern.

"Natalie, go." His voice was raw and husky. She took a step closer. "NO!" he snarled. "Leave NOW!" She hesitated, one hand outstretched to him, entreating. Nick felt her dawning awareness of his state and her sudden stab of fear laced with an undercurrent of desire.

"GO!" he roared.

"Let me help you." Nat took another step. Nick launched himself at her and pinned her back against the door. His hand grabbed her hair, his fingers tangling in it, and he pulled her head to the side.

"Nick, please," Natalie begged. But for what ... he didn't know, and neither did she. It took all of Nick's strength to force himself away, and he vaulted into the sky, the beast howling its rage ...

Natalie woke up disoriented, heart pounding, drawing in ragged breaths. Her throat was raw and she could still feel unfulfilled desire racing through her body.

A dream, she thought, her hand going to her neck to check for what she knew wasn't there. *Just a vivid dream. No more rum for you, Natalie Doctor's orders!* She got out of bed on still-trembling legs and headed for her kitchen to get a cold bottle of water from her fridge, trying to remember all of what happened last night.

It started with a surprise phone call from a college classmate. Carolyn McGuire was in town for the weekend and suggested they get together for drinks and let Natalie show her Toronto. Nat readily agreed; it would be fun, and she hadn't seen her old friend since forever. They met at a bar near the shopping district, had a few drinks while catching up on all the gossip.

They were walking, window-shopping, not watching where they were going, when Natalie bumped into an old woman, spilling her packages. They both reached down to help the woman retrieve her stuff, and when Natalie touched the old woman's hands, she gripped Natalie's hand with surprising strength.

"Darkness walks beside you, young woman. Beware!" The woman's eyes were bright and amazingly clear despite her obvious age. "You think you know what you want, to touch the darkness." The old woman mumbled a few words Natalie couldn't quite catch. She patted Natalie's hand and said, "Learn, daughter." Then she turned abruptly and walked away.

Nat looked at her friend uneasily. They both laughed.

"That was definitely spooky," Carolyn said. "Do you have any idea what she was talking about?"

"No," Nat frowned, then she brightened. "Let's not let this ruin our evening. I know this great little place that has the most sinful chocolate rum." Laughing, they walked on.



Nat had a great time with her friend, had one too many drinks, and stayed up way too late. That's all. She wasn't going to believe that some old woman sent her a dream about Nick. She glanced at her clock. *Oh, well*, she thought, *might as well stay up and get ready for work*.

Later, at work, Nat was studying some slides under the microscope when she started feeling strange. She couldn't quite place her finger on it, but it was like she was waiting — no, anticipating — something. She looked up at the door just as Nick opened it. Then it struck her hard: she had felt him. Somehow she knew Nick was coming through the door before he arrived. She frowned in puzzlement. He always snuck up on her; he loved it, and now she felt his disappointment at missing another opportunity to 'goose' her. *This is weird*, she thought.

"Hello? Nat? Are you in there?"

Nick waved his hand in front of her face. She grabbed it to push it away and gasped as her flesh met his. The room grew brighter, sounds grew louder, smells grew stronger. Everything was the same, but different, somehow. Heightened, maybe.

"Nat, are you all right?"

Nick's handsome face was inches from her own. She smiled and touched a finger to his lips. Cool, but so very soft. A very different note was creeping into his concern. Nat wondered if everything was this erotic to him all the time. How could he stand it? How did he deny the beast so often? Had she sometimes pushed him too far?

"Wha ...?" Nick started.

Nat shushed him by pushing her finger firmer on his lips. Her hand trailed down his chin, brushing softly on the hollow of his throat. Oh, yes, definitely, the concern he felt was being replaced with desire. She felt voyeuristic, wicked, and it felt oh so good. Nat looked up into his eyes, watching the golden flecks form. She could feel the beast awakening, starting to demand. She could sense all this and she felt almost high. Even her logical, good-girl voice was urging her on. She cupped Nick's face in her hands and pulled him even closer. Softly she kissed him, slowly deeper and more urgently as she felt his desire and emotion mixing with hers.

What are you doing? she asked herself.

What you want. The beast answered for her as she tangled her fingers in his soft hair. She trailed her kisses across his jaw, moving down to his neck, preparing to sink her fangs deep and ...

Natalie pulled herself back forcefully, breathing hard. She watched Nick. He stood there, eyes closed, mouth slightly open. Suddenly Nat realized that she couldn't feel what he was feeling any more. She laughed, breaking the spell.

Nick's eyes flew open. "Nat? Uh ... wha ...?" he started, bewilderment evident in his tone.

Nat smiled and linked her arm through his, leading him to the door. She tried to sound exasperated. "Oh, nothing. You just had one of those nasty flashbacks again. And you owe me a cup of hot coffee."

As they walked out of the room, Nat decided not to confide in Nick quite yet. She had a lot of thinking to do. On desire, and darkness.

V

by Shelia Turner

a stranger
(glimpse of a pale, pale face)
across a crowded room
(so odd, I can see)
clear blue, blue eyes
beacons
(calls, wills, entreats)
me
I feel my heart beat
(slip)
a hint
a tease of a smile
(he's here)
now a touch
a caress, steel
(velvet hands brushing my hair back
 lips nuzzle my cheek)
tongue traces icy
fire down
my neck
sweet
(piercing, sweet, glorious)
pai ... nirvana
at once I know
people places
history centuries
oblivion
I awake
my world is changed.

Human Remedy

by Winifred McBeth

A plague among the living
That names them with the dead.
Mortality comes early
To those whom hope has fled.
So limited the knowledge
That science now commands,
How can I offer healing
With only human hands?

What use is all my learning
Where ignorance prevails?
What higher wisdom leads me
When mortal effort fails?
Facing this contagion
No medicine withstands,
How can I cure the dying
With only human hands?

Anger strong as hunger,
Sorrow deep as shame
Striking at a people
That dare not speak its name.
Answered with compassion
As empathy demands;
How else to offer comfort
Except by human hands?

Moonlight Sonata

by L. L. Wright

"Hey, stranger! Welcome back! Looking good! The vacation did a good job on you! How was it?"

"What can I say, it was ... wonderful! The blue ocean, the fresh air, the warm sun, and the hot, cheap sex! Oh! Oh! The memories!"

"Sounds like you had one hell of a good time. You were careful, of course?"

"Damn right, man! I just work here, I don't want to end up here. Condoms galore! Hated to come back to the old sweat shop. Back to those long nights of cleaning shitty asses and having to listen to the complaints of the old people. Anything happen while I was away?"

"Nothing, just the same old same old. Except Old Lady Reynolds in 210 passed away a few days ago."

"Finally! Poor old girl, after that last stroke there wasn't much left."

"It was a good thing her family honored her wishes just to be made comfortable. No heroic measures to prolong the agony and strip away what little dignity these old people have left. Even at that, she lasted longer than we thought."

"Well, she was over ninety. Obviously had a good life, a loving family, a good career. I heard she was once chief medical examiner for this province. Widowed years ago and left with two sons and several grandchildren and God knows how many great-grandchildren. I'd say she had a damn good life. Was there any family with her when she passed? What about that guy, the one you called the piano player, was he here?"

"Oh, yeah, he was here. Just like every night for the past four months."

"You remember that day when we came on shift, the day shift was all abuzz about someone having sent over a piano tuner to work on that old, beat-up piano in the rec room? The old thing had been out of tune for so long no one wanted to bother with it. To hear music coming out of that thing was astonishing."

"Well, I personally didn't care for the playing. That classical stuff got on my nerves, but the show tunes were okay. Anyway, there was something offish about his timing ... well, at least to me there was. As long as the residents didn't mind, who was I to say?"

"What a snob. Liked the show tunes, did we? How typical."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I meant that I have no taste. But you should have heard him playing that night — the night she died. He had come at his

usual time, eight o'clock. Put her in the wheelchair and wheeled her to the rec room. He started out with the regular fare, then it changed. He played like we never heard him play before. You know that last piece he always played before stopping and taking her back to her room?"

"You mean Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata."

"Yeah, that one. God, you should have heard it. It was so moving. Me and that nurse from the registry just sat at the nurses' station, mesmerized. Some of the patients, the ones who could walk, were out in the hallway listening. That man was pouring out his heart in that music. There was such passion, such longing, you could feel it. Then the music faded away.

"When I hadn't heard anything for half an hour, I went to check the rec room. You know how he would sometimes sit for hours and talk to her, just holding her hand, like she could hear him, the state she was in. I checked the room, there was no one there. Then I went to her room and there she was, back in bed, fixed up nice and comfortable, and stone cold dead. You remember, he would always stop by the desk to let us know when he was leaving. Not that night. No one saw him leave, and no one has seen him since!"

"I always said there was something weird about that guy. We thought he was one of her great-grandchildren, but the way he would look at her, touch her, kiss her, only a lover would do that. Him in his mid-thirties and her old as dirt and brain-dead. It was sickening! There's got to be one hell of a story behind that. What did the family say? Did you get a chance to talk to any of them?"

"Yeah, I got a chance to speak to her oldest son when he came in that same night. I mentioned that we all thought it was a beautiful gesture having that musician come every night to play just for Mrs. Natalie Lambert-Reynolds. At first the son looked very confused; he had no idea what I was talking about. Then he asked me what the guy looked like. When I described him as being tall, blond, blue-eyed, soft-spoken and young, he got the funniest look on his face, as though someone had just stepped on his grave. He finally mumbled that it must have been Nick, just a very old friend of the family."

One Man's Dream

by Teresa Guinn-Garcia

He longs to see what he cannot
Longs to be what he is not
Living, feeding by night
Is his cursed lot.

He travels in darkness
Holding victims as prey
Yet — wanting to be free, to feel,
To see the blissful light of day.

Nary a morsel is he desirous to eat
To survive he must rely on
The eternal sanguinary treat.

He is able to reach heights
Within a single bound
Though all the whole longing
To remain firmly aground.

Cold is his heart — unable to love
He feigns for affection that mortals give of
Knowing, feeling much of what human lives do
He desperately longs to love, to kiss,
To say words as “I love you.”

What is this man's dream
This creature of the (k)night?
To leave his world of eternal darkness
And live safely, happily in the light.

Or — must he accept
A fate much greater than death by light
That of living eternally forever in the (k)night.

In Memory Of ...

by L. L. Wright

"He was a fool, and died like the fool he was!"

"Did it have to end that way? Something else could have been done!"

"Pray tell, what? It wasn't for me to bring her across! He had brought her to the brink, it was up to him. Bring her across or let her die. He chose to let her die! Always mouthing off how he loved the humanity in her and how it would die if she became one of us. It was all his fault!"

"No, you couldn't bring Natalie across, could you! She was competition; with her dead and out of the way, you thought you had won. You realized too late you lost."

LaCroix and Janette sat in a booth in a distant corner of the mainly deserted lounge. The glow from the window next to them bathed their faces in its cold, hard light.

"You know how petulant our dear Nicholas could be. I warned him this search for mortality would be his undoing. So self-righteous! In the end he died a murderer and a suicide. And he thinks he'll be with her in the next life."

"Unlike the rest of us," Janette quietly said, "Nicholas could no longer remain detached from the mortals that surrounded him. His real crime was that, in his search for the humanity he felt he lost so long ago, he let his passion dictate his actions. I can only hope that whatever there is on the other side met them with compassion and understanding." Toying with the empty wine glass in front of her, Janette continued, "At first, I tried to find you, LaCroix. I wanted to know what happened, but ..."

"I didn't want to be found. You could say the time wasn't right; perhaps it is, now. This does seem to be the appropriate place for our meeting, don't you think? Tell me, Janette, what is it like over there?"

"Like all new worlds: challenging, exciting, different. With everything built underground there are no worries about the sun. I make my home there now, and the nightclub business has been very good."

"Well, it looks like we might be running into each other. I'm looking for a change. It's time to move on once again."

"I'm leaving on a business vacation, and will be returning within the week. Tell me, LaCroix, about that night ... why?"

LaCroix's voice took on a hard edge. "He placed the staff in my hands. He wanted to die — to be put out of his misery. I just did what he asked, that was all!" Turning his eyes to the window, concentrating on the passing

panorama of stars, he continued. "Afterwards, I waited." His voice softened. "The room had become quiet and empty. Then, as though a door opened, the room filled with such a feeling of ... peace. I never felt anything like it before."

Janette nodded. "Yes, I felt it, too."

"At first," LaCroix continued, "I planned to cremate their bodies and let their ashes mingle in the blowing wind, but I burned Divia hoping to destroy her evil, for some reason, I couldn't do that to them. So I preserved them."

"LaCroix, why?"

"It was all about their wanting to be together. So, I just made sure that they would always be together."

"I had bought Nicholas' property at 101 Gateway Lane when it came up for sale and years later, when the area was being developed for high-rise condominiums, I developed the land as a park. A memorial stands in its midst. A simple inscription on a bronze plaque reads: In memory of my closest friend. Those were Nicholas' last words to me that night"

"Their bodies are sealed inside that monument, Hidden, preserved, protected for as long as it stands, and I made sure it will stand ... forever. You really should see it I've heard, over the passing decades, it's become a favorite with lovers, and weddings have been held there. How very ironic!"

"Still not able to let go, even in death. But, LaCroix, why so angry? Poor Nikola never ..."

"Poor Nicholas never thought through the consequences of his actions! Angry! Yes, I'm angry! Like all those touched by a suicide, he left me with the memory, the pain and the guilt! If I could drag him back into this life of darkness he so hated, I would. He deserves no rest! No peace! No mercy! What he did to me was worse than Divia ever could!" Pausing, letting himself calm down, LaCroix then smiled. "It's the old story of two people destroying each other because of love. A tragedy worthy of a corny fairy tale."

"The true tragedy, LaCroix, was that three people were destroyed by the love of one person. Poor Nikola believed his love would only bring destruction and, because of that belief, in the end it did. It destroyed him. It destroyed Natalie and ... it's destroying you! You still have the chance to learn that love does not have to destroy, but that is up to you."

A high, nasal voice announcing departure times briefly disturbed the conversation, and lightened the highly charged atmosphere of the room.

"We must talk about this further," Janette added, "but for now, you have a shuttle to catch."

Good Dog!

by Winifred McBeth

How much is that doggy in the window —
The one with the glowing red eyes?
If I buy that doggy in the window
I think I'm in for a surprise!

Now, I live and work here in Toronto
And I walk alone in the dark
But I feel quite safe with my new doggy;
His bite is much worse than his bark!

Have you seen my doggy in the window?
He mustn't go out in the day
And if he should fly into your window
My doggy would just like to play!

I can't understand why our new mailman
Wears garlic and carries a stake?
Obedience school was quite expensive
But one good investment to make!

There's No Place Like Home

by Winifred McBeth

He knelt and took her cold hand in his own. He heard the fast, whispered curse from his master and felt a sharp, piercing pain sunder his heart.

The pain continued until it dulled, as an echo fades after the shout. He could still *feel* his heart in his chest, a pulse of sensation as steady as a living heartbeat.

After a single gasp, an indrawing of air, he was breathing again. Awareness was returning and with it, confusion. He was not where he had been.

There was a fireplace nearby, that much was the same. He could smell stale straw and fresh-cut rushes. There were humans around him. He knew this without the imperative of hunger that had tormented him for so long. The staccato beat in the center of his chest persisted. He set his fears aside and opened his eyes.

A child stared back at him. The boy's face was covered with the grimy tracks of tears and surrounded by a halo of golden curls. "Papa! Papa!" The boy energetically thumped his chest and called insistently. "Dormé vous, papa? Dormé vous?"

"Nicholas?" A delighted laugh followed this exclamation. "He's awake! Thank heaven!" The speaker walked into his line of sight. Her smile lit her face and shone from her blue eyes. Flaxen hair strayed from the demure braids into which it had been woven. She wore her plain dress with easy grace, its hem just brushing the rushes covering the stone floor, its long sleeves pushed up to free the hands for work. She was the match of the child beside him.

"Alyssa?" His voice was rough with long disuse.

"Yes, my love." Her hand caressed his forehead. "You were ill for so long, we had begun to despair of your recovery."

"The fever's broken, then?" a brusque, no-nonsense voice asked. The woman who had spoken pushed back a tangle of unruly brown curls and regarded her patient with a measuring look.

"Natalie?" Images overlapped in confusion.

"You remember?" She raised an appraising eyebrow. "That's a good sign. I had begun to think that all my herb lore was for nothing."

"You are a wise woman and a fine midwife." Alyssa defended her friend staunchly. "Didn't you help deliver this little one here?"

"Not little!" the child immediately protested. Natalie smiled and ruffled his curls before displacing him at his father's bedside.

"What else do you remember?" she carefully asked her patient. "Do you know this castle and who is lord of it?"

Familiarity returned to him. "DuBrabant?"

"Well enough," a male voice responded in good humor. "Do you remember your catechism also?"

The healer smiled as she looked aside. "I must caution you, good father, not to test him with too much so soon."

"I will be content, then, to give thanks for his recovery." The priest came into his line of sight. Again, images overlapped, familiar to him and then not. The vestments and the tonsure, those he recognized. The features of the priest confounded him. Had he ever seen this face beam with such good nature? Or was it that he had never seen this face without its easy benevolence?

"LaCroix?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yes, 'the cross'!" The priest nodded, gesturing to a simply made wooden cross, held fast to the patient's hand by a stout cord. "You seemed to take great comfort in it while you were ill. In all your ravings, 'la croix' was what you spoke of most."

Last Knight
by Jacqueline Taero

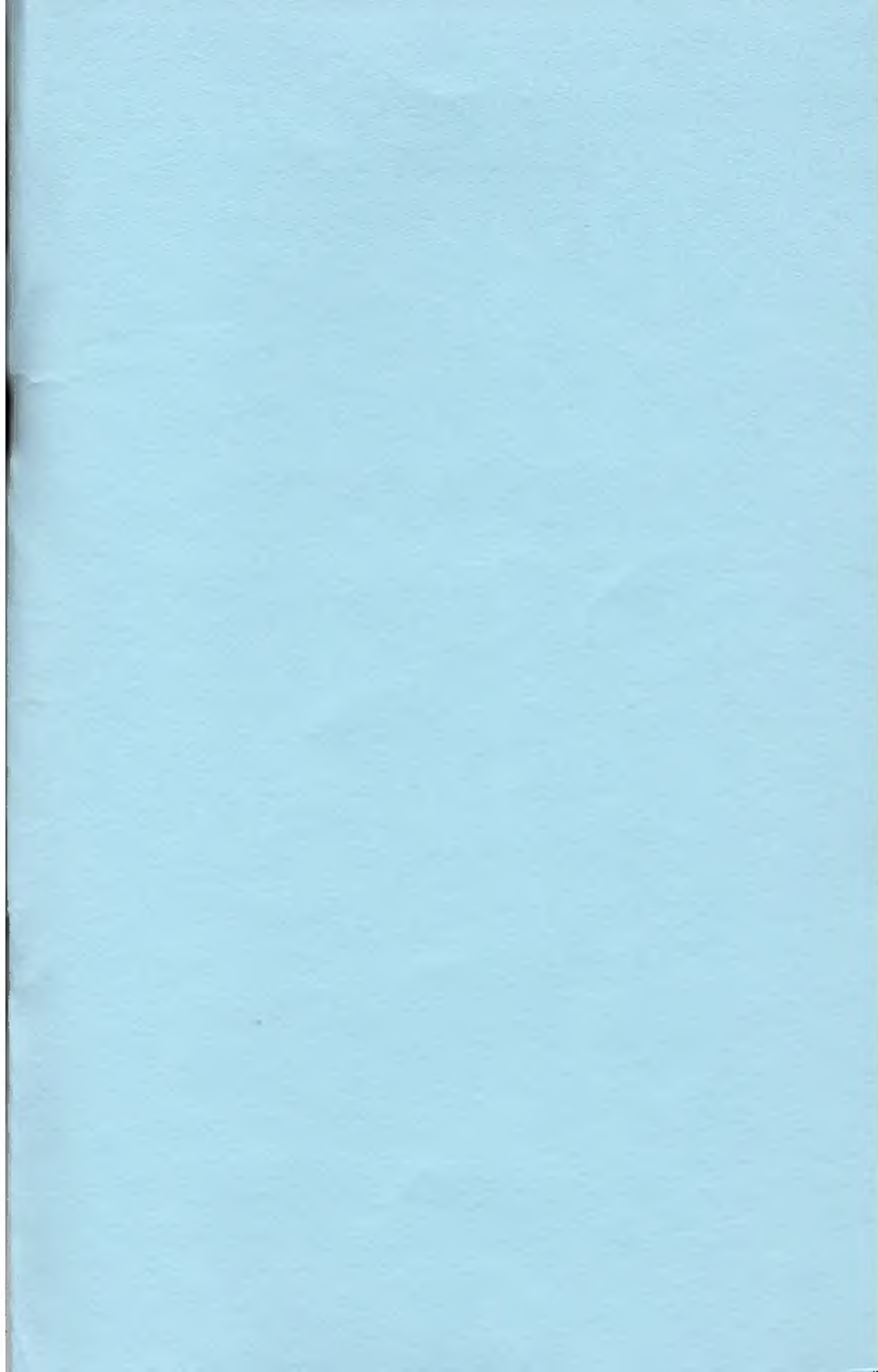
Our final hour has come at last,
Our hopes all forlorn and refused.
I love you, Nat, but Tracy is dead —
Ah ... Help me, Nat. I'm confused.

The continuity of my life
Falls around me, rent and tattered.
Eight hundred years of bloody death,
And it's by *hers* I'm shattered?

I stood once at eternity's gate
With no choice but to turn and leave
For my atonement had fallen short —
And *now* I do not believe?

I paid the price, Nat, and dearly so
When LaCroix would have claimed your soul.
But I do not love you quite enough,
For I have no self-control.

Something's wrong here, Nat. Hold on, LaCroix.
Before my life force drains away,
I think there's someone I need to see
At the network USA ...





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